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ABSTRACT

This text presents a conversation between James Comer and Ronald Edmonds, whose meeting in New Haven in 1982 was sponsored by the Danforth Foundation to describe and compare the differences in their approaches to school reform. Each developed an Effective Schools model based on the belief that all students can learn. Comer's focus, however, was on parent involvement, and Edmonds stressed equity. Six chapters center on six separate educational issues, which include the organizational dilemma, creating a climate conducive to learning, the role of categorical programs, change strategies, disaggregating data, and the significance of parental involvement in the school improvement process. The two men shared agreement on the importance of instructional leadership, high expectations, and a positive school climate. A conclusion is that similarities outnumbered the differences in their educational philosophies. (LMI)

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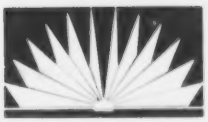

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

A resource for assuring quality and equity in education.

What is the National Center for Effective Schools?

The Center is a not-for-profit organization formed in 1986 for the purpose of serving as a research and resource center, clearing house, and technical assistance base for educational professionals designing and implementing programs of school reform.

Based on a planned-change educational model known as the Effective Schools Research Model, the Center's major objective is to provide assistance to schools in order to assure that all pupils, regardless of gender, race, or socioeconomic status, receive both a quality education and an equal opportunity to learn.

What is the "Effective Schools Model?"

Simply stated, the "Effective Schools Model" is a school reform framework based on evolving research from both empirical studies and case studies of schools across the country that have been effective in teaching the intended curriculum to *all* their students.

Out of that research, two standards for measuring effectiveness have evolved: quality and equity. The quality standard assures that the level of achievement in a school is high. The equity standard assures that the high achievement does not vary significantly across the subsets of the school's student population. Not only are these standards critical to the definition of "Effective Schools," they are also the pillars on which the National Center's major objective has been established.

A Conversation Between James Comer and Ronald Edmonds

Fundamentals of Effective School Improvement

National Center for Effective Schools
Research and Development
Okemos, Michigan

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With Appreciation

The National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development wishes to thank Dr. Joan Shoemaker of the Connecticut State Department of Education for bringing this important conversation to the Center's attention. Together with her colleague, Dr. Ben Turner, she transcribed the original verbal phrases into a written text. Kate O'Neill, of the National Center staff, then worked with Dr. Shoemaker to bring the monograph to its final form. The finished product was read by both Dr. Comer and Dr. Ervin and approved as an authentic work.

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Foreword

I am honored by the invitation to write the introduction for this published conversation between Jim Comer and Ron Edmonds, for I have admired these two scholars throughout my career as an educator. Many initiatives that I have pursued as an urban superintendent and as a state commissioner are rooted in their research and work.

As an urban superintendent in the 1970s I grappled with the problems of poverty and learning. Much of the educational thinking was in response to the 1966 study by the U. S. Office of Education (the Coleman Report, 1966), which concluded that schools cannot make a difference for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some educators used the study's conclusions to justify low levels of achievement for low-income children, but I did not and will not accept the notion that learning is predicated upon the socioeconomic status of the child.

Ron Edmonds and Jim Comer were among the few who extended hope to urban educators and gave us renewed vigor. Comer (in his book, *School Power*) and Edmonds (in his work at Harvard on instructionally effective schools) refuted the premise that the poor could not achieve. Both men called for the initiation of equitable and successful learning practices. "Equitable public schooling," Edmonds wrote, "begins by teaching poor children what their parents want them to know and ends by teaching poor children at least as well as it teaches middle-class children."

This was a breath of fresh air for urban educators. Comer and Edmonds were reinforcing what I had always believed: All children can learn. With certain changes and innovations, an environment could be created to provide excellent education for all. And as I now reflect upon the goals I have pursued over the years, I realize that both Jim Comer and Ron Edmonds have significantly affected my educational philosophy.

It is easy for me to praise Jim Comer's work. I have personally witnessed the benefits it has brought to the New Haven public school system since 1968. When I became superintendent of schools in New Haven, Comer was already there working on behalf of educational achievement for all students. I was able to observe his effectiveness in the schools he researched and his dedication to the students of those schools. By modifying

social and psychological conditions in the schools, he was able to produce a more facilitative school climate which, in turn, influenced student achievement scores. A heavy emphasis was placed on parent participation in the program, and Comer stresses this as an important linkage that must be developed if schools are to become effective.

He prefers to participate personally in the process of "making a school better," and he is indeed an extraordinary person and motivator. In *School Power,* he outlines his program in detail, allowing others the opportunity to replicate it. He is still at Yale University Child Study Center, working with the New Haven school system and other urban districts throughout the United States.

I also have great admiration for Ron Edmonds and his work. I have incorporated many of his thoughts into my work, as a superintendent and as Commissioner of Education for the State of Connecticut. The focus of his work was equity:

"I measure our progress as a social order by our willingness to advance the equity interests of the least among us," he wrote. And to define equity more clearly, he believed in measuring instructional effectiveness using objective criteria. Ten years after Edmonds' statements, Connecticut is beginning to move toward the general concept of subgroup analysis. For the first time this year we have disaggregated our state mastery test results to give us a clearer picture of the success rate of the different populations of students. The results in disaggregated analysis provide the State Department of Education with the opportunity to use resources where they are most needed through the state.

Comer and Edmonds each developed an Effective Schools model. There are indeed differences between the models. More important,[sm] however, are the similarities in the components of their models—instructional leadership, high expectations, a positive climate. I strongly believe in school effectiveness as supported by Comer and Edmonds.

Comer's approach is summarized in his statement:

> "I am suggesting that most schools and school systems can become more productive and happier places to be than they are right now. Nothing is wrong with public schools that programs to revitalize communities and families cannot improve through participation, cooperation, and an atmosphere of trust."

sm: Service mark. "Effective Schools" is a service mark of the National Center for Effective Schools, as is "Effective Schools Research." The capitalized phrase denotes the comprehensive model espoused by the National Center. The lower case used in the body of this monograph ("effective schools") denotes that the comprehensive model used today was not known at the time of this conversation.

Edmonds' focus is revealed in the following statement:

> ". . . no notion about schooling is more widely held than the belief that the family is somehow the principal determinant of whether or not a child will do well in school. The popularity of that belief continues partly because many social scientists and opinionmakers continue to espouse the belief that family background is the chief cause of the quality of pupil performance. Such a belief has the effect of absolving educators of their professional responsibility to be instructionally effective."

The Effective Schools philosophy is based on the belief that all—not a few, not most, but all—students can learn. The work of Edmonds provided the catalyst and initial design for such programs. Effective Schools researchers have identified seven organizational characteristics:

- safe and orderly environment
- clear and focused school mission
- instructional leadership
- high expectations
- opportunity to learn and student time on task
- frequent monitoring of student progress
- home-school relations

The School Effectiveness Program, conceptualized by Jim Comer and Ron Edmonds, became a reality in Connecticut in 1978. The program defines an Effective School as one in which there is no significant difference in the proportion of youth demonstrating minimum academic mastery as a function of socioeconomic class. Since 1981, 94 schools in 31 districts serving 35,000 students have participated in Connecticut's voluntary approach to school effectiveness. The state of Connecticut continues in search of equity and excellence in education. In 1986, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a policy statement and guidelines on equal educational opportunity. It states:

> Equal educational opportunity means student access to a level and quality of programs and experiences which provide each child with the means to achieve a commonly defined standard of an educated citizen.
>
> This goal will require resource allocations based upon individual student needs and sufficient resources to provide each child with opportunities for developing his or her intellectual abilities and special talents to the fullest.
>
> Evidence of equal educational opportunity is the participation of each student in programs appropriate to his or her needs and the achievement by each of the state's student sub-populations (as defined by such factors as wealth, race, sex or residence) of educational outcomes at least equal to that of the state's student population as a whole.

We were given a vision in the 1970s, we witnessed the vision become reality in the 1980s, and now we must look ahead into the 1990s. Accompanying the rejuvenation of Effective Schools are ideas which extend the Effective Schools concepts, such as "accountability" and "restructuring." Accountability, through the process of disaggregation of data, staff development, and professional procedures to insure improved student performance, is the basis of Effective Schools programs. Restructuring implies that mere pragmatic school improvement is not enough to save the most needy schools, because the structures of those organizations are inherently faulty. The new literature opens to question all aspects of schooling, and in the decade ahead we must respond to these concerns.

The following text is a conversation between James Comer and Ronald Edmonds, whose meeting in New Haven in 1982 was sponsored by the Danforth Foundation. The Foundation brought them together, with John Ervin of the Foundation serving as moderator, so that they might describe and compare the difference in their approaches to educational reform. After reading the text and being familiar with their work, I conclude—and so do they at various times throughout the conversation—that there are more similarities between them than there are differences. These similarities are the visions of two great men and their commitment to excellence and equity in education.

Gerald N. Tirozzi, Ph.D.
Commissioner
Connecticut State Department of Education

January, 1989

Preface

The improvement of schools and schooling has been an important objective of the Danforth Foundation for many years. A particular concern has been involvement in decision-making by all of the stakeholders in the schooling enterprise—professionals (administrators, teachers), citizens (school board members, parents, business leaders, community representatives), and students. While that objective may have seemed clear, there was much disagreement among participants about how to achieve it.

To provide enlightenment on this discourse, the Foundation staff invited informed and experienced persons from various sectors related to schools to interact with local representatives of those sectors.

Parental participation and involvement was an area of much interest to the Danforth Foundation staff. It sponsored programs in which parents were invited to meet with representatives of parent groups from other cities across the country to learn how to become involved with schools, and to appreciate the possible benefits to themselves, their children, the school system, and the community at large.

Within the context of these activities, Ronald Edmonds and James Comer came to St. Louis. Edmonds became a consultant with an Effective Schools project involving four inner-city schools, and Comer consulted with groups of school board members, parent groups, and other school personnel. At times, these two researcher/educators seemed to take divergent positions with regard to parental involvement in school improvement efforts.

Edmonds was heard to say that parental involvement was not an essential element in achieving school effectiveness. Instead, he indicated that the work that teachers and principals do with the students determines the level of effectiveness which will be achieved. He was even heard to assert that parental involvement was a kind of extra bonus—not a basic requirement—and that too many school people used the absence of meaningful parental involvement as an excuse to avoid taking actions to improve school effectiveness.

Comer had been invited to participate because of his work with two schools in New Haven, Connecticut, described in his book, *School Power*.

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His approach to school improvement considered parental involvement a major requirement, without which improvement in pupil performance was not likely to take place.

This divergence was troublesome to many in the local community who had great respect for the work of both men. We wanted to determine whether their apparent differences were substantive enough to affect our efforts in St. Louis.

So a decision was made to persuade Comer and Edmonds to agree to an extended conversation, in which the matter might be explored in depth, and clarification made of points of similarity and difference in their positions.

John B. Ervin, Ph.D.
Vice President, Danforth Foundation,
1977–1986

January, 1989

Biographies

James P. Comer

James Comer received an M.D. degree from Howard University and a Master of Public Health in Administration and Mental Health from the University of Michigan School of Public Health. He joined the staff of the Yale University Child Study Center in 1968 and has served as Director of the Center since 1973.

From 1968 to 1973, Dr. Comer was responsible for the Yale Child Study Center component of the Baldwin-King School Program, which applied the principles of psychiatry and the behavioral sciences to the problems of inner-city school education. Since that time, Dr. Comer has directed implementation of the program in other schools in New Haven, both elementary and secondary, and in school systems in Connecticut, Michigan, Virginia, Arkansas, and Maryland.

Dr. Comer is the author of numerous articles and books, including *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* (1980).

Ronald R. Edmonds

Ronald R. Edmonds received his undergraduate education at the University of Michigan and a M.A. from Eastern Michigan University. Subsequently, he studied and held a Research Associateship at Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

His early teaching and research activities were at Harvard, where he served as Director of the Center for Urban Studies from 1973 to 1977.

From 1978 to 1981, he served as Senior Assistant to the Chancellor for Instruction in the New York City Schools concurrent with his appointment at Harvard.

At the time of his death in 1983, Mr. Edmonds was a Professor at Michigan State University in the College of Education and a Senior Researcher in the Institute for Research on Teaching.

From 1981 until his death, Mr. Edmonds collaborated with Professor Lawrence Lezotte (then a faculty member at Michigan State University) in working on the design and implementation of training programs for school improvement based on Effective Schools Research.

Issue One

The Organizational Dilemma

- Public schools as determined by the middle-class families
- School improvement and resistance to change
- The dynamics of organizational change

Ronald Edmonds and James Comer begin the conversation, following an introductory statement by moderator John Ervin, ready for disagreement, each asserting what he believed were personal differences in his philosophy of school improvement. Quickly the tone of the conversation changes to one of convergence around one viewpoint—the belief that nobody else thought it was possible to change inner city schools. The Harvard professor and Yale psychiatrist connect as they share anxieties and disappointment they had experienced in bringing their ideas to superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents. Not only did these people lack conviction that schools could improve, but there was also a lack of readiness and support to enable schools to improve. Edmonds and Comer entered a public school climate of resistance and disenchantment.

John Ervin

Before I came to work at the Danforth Foundation in 1977, after having been a trustee of the Foundation since the middle '60s, the focus of my work had been recruitment of minority graduate students for a university graduate fellowship program. Just before I left the university I got involved also in matters relating to the segregation of public schools. Since nobody at that time was talking about segregation except the lawyers, we were attempting to expand that dialogue to include everybody who had anything to do with public schools.

After I came to the Foundation I was encouraged to stay with that activity and provide leadership for the Foundation in this whole business of involving those people who ought to be working their way through the matters relating to segregation and litigation.

When the desegregation plan was put together for the city of St. Louis, the plan to achieve racial balance in the schools started at the southern end of the city (which was predominantly white) and moved only as far north as necessary to bring some sense of stability to racial balance. That meant that more than half of the black children in the city of St. Louis would continue to go to all black schools. At that point we became interested in trying to do something for the north end of the city, because we believed that all of the energies, the money, and the human resources of the community would be focusing on those schools under the direct jurisdiction of the court. So we put together a plan and an education program for four black schools, building on the research and search for effective schools, in the northern part of the district. We are now (in 1982) at the point of expanding the project from those four schools to sixteen schools. The four schools, the superintendent, the principals, parents, and teachers have already held several meetings with the principals and the teachers of the more traditional schools, so that the Danforth involvement may soon extend from four to sixteen schools.

We are focusing on two pieces. One is the effective schools activity, and the other is the continuing support for those organizations which are related to the desegregation process. If we are to be able to make the best use of the Danforth Foundation resources, we need to be as clear as we can be about the shape of the interventions, maximizing as much as we can from the best decisions.

Why don't we just begin by having each of you reflect a bit on what you are hearing from the Danforth context?

James Comer

Let me start with an idea. We talk a lot about class distinctions and teacher expectations. The point is often made that when the middle-class parents left the neighborhood, accountability left too; that when the middle-class parents leave, the equation changes around school effectiveness.

The presence or absence of middle class parents is irrelevant to the system's accountability to the various portions of the population it serves.

Ronald Edmonds

I don't agree with that diagnosis at all. I don't think the public school system in St. Louis or any other big city in the United States was more accountable when there were middle class parents in the system than it is now. The presence or absence of middle class parents is irrelevant to the system's accountability to the various portions of the population it serves. If the presence of middle-class parents makes school systems more responsive to children, then the record would show that when school systems are predominantly middle class, they are simultaneously more responsive to all parents, including low-income parents, and they are also more instructionally effective. But the record does not show that. The distribution of achievement for poor children is independent of the presence or absence of middle-class parents. As I see it, what middle-class parents do or do not do has little effect on what happens to poor kids in terms of levels of achievement.

When the vitality of the system is sapped, those kids who might have made it in a vital system don't, because the vital system doesn't exist.

James Comer

I would agree with that. On the other hand, I would argue that when middle-class parents are present in the school, the vitality of the school remains. Because of the vitality, a handful of poor kids, who also happen to come from families who support them, have a better chance of making it than in a system where middle-class parents disappear. When the vitality of the system is sapped, those kids who might have made it in a vital system don't, because the vital system doesn't exist.

Ronald Edmonds

Jim talks about a minority of low-income kids who have historically profited from participating in vital enterprises, and that is surely true. I tend not to think much about that. I acknowledge it quite readily, but I tend not to think much about it. I tend to think about mass solutions. Jim thinks about schools in more qualitative terms; I subscribe to that interest but only from a practical point of view. I am only prepared to endorse an enterprise at the point where benefits will accrue to virtually everybody.

I get schools ready to grapple with the fundamental qualitative issues of schools. That's all I do; I get them ready. But even what I do raises achievement, although I don't claim that raising achievement in a school system is necessarily part of the larger agenda that schools ought to address. That's why I have no problem discriminating between what I do and what Jim does, and in saying that Jim is after educational excellence and I'm after instructional effectiveness. I don't have a problem with that at all.

James Comer

I agree that the mass solution should be what gets looked at. You have to look at the great body of low-income kids who are not prepared to make it in a system, whether or not it is vital. You've got to find a way to address that group of kids. That's what effective schools are all about. But I would also add that I think it is possible to address the issue of vitality and instructionally effective schools simultaneously. In my opinion, vitality makes the instructionally effective school possible.

You have to look at the great body of low-income kids who are not prepared to make it in a system, whether or not it is vital. You've got to find a way to address that group of kids. That's what effective schools are all about.

I'll tell you what concerns me. When you insist that a school staff carry out an instructionally effective program without dealing with their underlying feelings, attitudes, or relationships, you may get destructive reactions. This can make if very difficult to carry out the kind of program you'd like. And I've seen it happen. For fourteen years in New Haven we had no reaction at all to our efforts from the union. This year, one of the schools got tremendous union reaction within that building.

That reaction then spread to others in the union. Until there was clarification and more work on the process of change, the union was prepared to issue a white paper against effective schools. And so I'm saying that unless you deal immediately with these underlying relationships, you may set off a reaction that will make it difficult to implement an effective schools program.

John Ervin

It seems to me that when this conversation began we were talking about relationship issues focusing on middle-class families outside of the

schools; now we're shifting to the relationship issues contained within the school environment.

There is a system that is resistant to change, backed up by people who take the stance that these kids can't learn.

James Comer

There are some teachers and administrators who don't believe these kids can learn. There are parents who resent these attitudes but feel at the mercy of those teachers and administrators who feel that their kids can't learn. There is a system that is resistant to change, backed up by people who take the stance that these kids can't learn. A resistance is there when you ask teachers and principals to do more work, to begin to think differently. They believe that you are simply asking them to go along with another one of those liberal dreams, and it is not going to work any better than any other liberal dream that they've been asked to try. Then they react in many ways, trying to undermine the program. Teachers can go to their unions and complain about what "they" are trying to do to "us." If you have the power (such as the superintendent has) and say: "We will do this," or if you have a community that will really get up in arms, or a mayor who really wants to make this happen, and/or parents who are powerful enough to really put the pressure on to make things happen, then the union will have less ability to resist and teachers will have less ability to resist. The question is how to bring about change without anybody's feelings being threatened—without people feeling that nothing is going to do any good in the long run.

Our approach is to get in and make change occur, so that the change in itself breaks the resistance, rather than telling people what they must know so that these kids can learn.

Our approach is to get in and make change occur, so that the change in itself breaks the resistance, rather than telling people what they must know so that these kids can learn. If you take the other approach and say this is the way it is; here is what you must do to make change happen; you suggest to teachers that they are not doing what they should be doing. That only adds to their resistance.

Poor achievement is not the fault of school staff, or students, or parents. We take a no-fault position. We say that complexity and history explain why things are the way they are.

Ronald Edmonds

I want to illustrate how to avoid reaction which leads to resistance. When Larry Lezotte and I initially offered training opportunities for elementary schools, we made the offer to an organization called Middle Cities, consisting of the 21 largest school districts in Michigan except Detroit (we were already in Detroit). To our amazement, 100 percent of the superintendents decided to participate. Each accepted an invitation from us to send to the [Michigan State University] campus the following five staff members: the chief instructional officer in the system, the person responsible for testing and evaluation, the head of the teachers' union, a principal from the

level at which the superintendent would contemplate intervention, and a teacher from either the same building or the same level. Some of the teams were led by their own superintendent. To our amazement, we ended up not with four or five districts, but with 21 districts times five people.

We have taken the following approach with these cities. We answered the issue about the educability of the kids by telling them we would not address the issue of attitude. We would merely say, we know how to teach the attainable professional behaviors that will predictably produce mastery—minimum mastery, that is. We only discuss relationships in the context of their professional implications and their contributions to instructional effectiveness. We teach that there are no instructional problems that have not already been solved. The only issue is, whether or not the organization makes available to principals and teachers the extraordinary repertoire of school behaviors and teacher behaviors that will produce mastery for the full range of the population.

We tell them: "We are not going to ask you to do anything that we can't teach you how to do, if you ask us." So when they ask us, for example, how to teach math to fifth graders from low-income families, we answer very explicitly, describing how classrooms are organized so as to eliminate discipline problems consistently. We teach how explicit programs of instruction are organized, whether they are aimed at the content of reading or the content of math, or any other substantive content. We can teach them that the principles that explain universal mastery in a third-grade math class are the same as the principles that explain universal mastery in an eleventh-grade business class. It is, quite literally, the case. The literature on which this knowledge is based was derived from accumulated observations that run all the way from third-grade math classes to eleventh-grade business classes.

We tell them: "We are not going to ask you to do anything that we can't teach you how to do, if you ask us."

What we have discovered, so far, is that there is no resistance. Well, I shouldn't say that, but no resistance has been made known to us. We are talking about a context in which all superintendents endorse the enterprise. Some superintendents actually led the enterprise, and all superintendents (whether they led their teams or not) were with us for half a day before we began and for half a day at the end. And we required all teams to produce two plans for us: One was an internal plan to disseminate the knowledge we conveyed and the second was at least one plan for intervening in one school. The superintendent had to sign this. The least amount of intervention was in a district in which the superintendent planned to intervene in one elementary school. The greatest amount of intervention was in the district in which the superintendent planned to intervene the following year in something like half of all his elementary schools. Some of the smaller of those Model Cities planned to intervene in all their schools at once.

I think that we allay anxiety simply because we don't ask people to do things we can't teach them how to do. Apparently they believe in us.

We started at a time—1968—when nobody believed that it was possible to change inner city schools.

James Comer

The fact that people are going to initiate a program does not mean that it's going to work. My concern about resistance is in part related to the history of our program. We started at a time—1968—when nobody believed that it was possible to change inner city schools. Certainly in New Haven very few believed that.

Ronald Edmonds

Nobody in Cambridge did either.

James Comer

We did not have the superintendent saying this is something he believed in; this is something he thought we should do. We had a situation in which people expected us to die in a couple of years and go away like other Yale programs. Where you have a superintendent and a group of teachers who support the program, as we now have in New Haven, you have less resistance.

I'm concerned about the particular group of schools, which, for whatever reasons, are at the bottom in terms of talent and potential—that group of schools where it is most difficult to intervene without a process that reduces their anxiety and gives them certain kinds of skills and support to work through the process.

Everybody knows the direction of the system is what the superintendent wants. Despite this, I find that even among those who commit themselves to change and to school improvement there are subtle ways in which they can resist. And, in part, the degree of resistance depends on whether you are dealing with schools where by chance you have an effective principal or a cluster of effective teachers or a parent group that can support constructive change or vice versa. So as we talk about schools changing, we have got to think about whether we're talking about schools that happen to have one or more things going for them or schools that have nothing going for them. In those schools where you have a principal who makes it happen, you could give that school an approach, and support that principal in that approach, so that the principal can bring it off. Or if you happen to have a group of effective teachers you can do the same. What I am concerned about is the resistance in places where you don't have that accidental combination of people who can make it happen. There you are dealing not only with resistance; you may be dealing first with poverty of talent but also with a poverty of spirit. These conditions then support, reinforce, or produce resistance in the face of your suggestion that these children can learn, if the school's administrators and teachers will do something.

I'm concerned about the particular group of schools, which, for whatever reasons, are at the bottom in terms of talent and potential—that group of schools where it is most difficult to intervene without a process that reduces their anxiety and gives them certain kinds of skills and support to

work through the process. There you really have to deal with relationships and reduce resistance.

Ronald Edmonds

Well, I can be easy in my own mind about such risks because I can report that all of the poor children in the 20 or 21 largest school districts in the state of Michigan have at least a prospect for substantial improvement in the quality of their instruction, beginning next year. I think that is wondrous to be able to report that there is an enterprise getting under way which involves that proportion of the school age children in any state.

I expect there will be an incredible diversity in the means that these school people will set up. For the moment, I'm willing to put off all other expectations, at least until we see what it looks like a year from now.

James Comer

Yes, I see what you are saying. I have probably caused others to misunderstand our approach by use of the concept of mental health and with my focus on issues of relationship. What we do doesn't even look like attention to, or concern for mental health. The concepts may sound profound or sophisticated, but what we actually do to initiate change is really very simple and straightforward.

We go into schools and we get people involved in social activities where they have a chance to be successful; get them involved together—parents, teachers, administrators. And we make certain that they are successful. That has the immediate effect of bringing parents, teachers, and administrators together in a way that they begin to trust each other. It then allows us to focus on the curriculum and the academic program. But what we've done is address the issues that have to do with resistance. Because we identified the interactional problems as obstacles, we arranged the program so that we addressed these issues first. But they don't take a great deal of time, energy, or effort. The first welcome-back-to-school supper that parents, teachers, and administrators plan together puts everybody on the same track. All we have to do is make sure that they plan that supper and it is successful. Then we are off and running. Of course this is just one example of a building's comprehensive social plan.

We go into schools and we get people involved in social activities where they have a chance to be successful; . . .

The first welcome-back-to school supper that parents, teachers, and administrators plan together puts everybody on the same track.

Ronald Edmonds

We never accepted from the 21 districts any plan that didn't include parents. The provisions we made were: 1) all plans must have a parent com-

ponent, and 2) no plan was to be drawn in such a way that depended on the parent. It depended on the other things—not on the parent.

James Comer

We believe that school people must work and teach in a way that emphasizes the basics and will enable the kids to come up to expectations. The only thing we argue is that this can be done more efficiently, with less resistance, and be sustained longer, if it is done in a climate in which people get along reasonably well. Let me give you a vignette: A curriculum specialist at a summer meeting marched in and said, "We are going to work on curriculum, but we don't have to like each other to do that. We're going to work on curriculum only." Then she snapped at a couple of people saying, "This is absurd." Then she criticized a couple of specialists in an inappropriate way. Soon after that, the air conditioner shut off. In such a poor climate for working relationships, participants couldn't pull the meeting together in the face of difficulty. The entire meeting blew up. The group never got to curriculum matters.

I am simply saying that you can create a climate where you can develop a commitment to get along and do the best job possible. You must deal with the stresses that interfere with people doing their job.

I would argue that if you create a climate which enables people to relate to each other with respect, and support each other, then you can better manage the stresses that are normal in school systems. I am simply saying that you can create a climate where you can develop a commitment to get along and do the best job possible. You must deal with the stresses that interfere with people doing their job.

I do not like to recommend to people those behaviors which I cannot teach to them.

Ronald Edmonds

The reason I don't include what you said in the programs I design, Jim, although I endorse it, is that I feel very insecure, both personally and professionally, in saying to a group of people, "You need to get along better in order to make this program work." I do not like to recommend to people those behaviors which I cannot teach to them. It's not that I don't believe in what you said. I certainly think it is true. However, if I said that to them I would feel like a fraud. If they came back to me later and said we're not getting along very well, I would not misrepresent myself as being able to help them in that regard.

John Ervin

Can I describe what we did in St. Louis and have you both react to it as still a third, fourth, or fifth way of approaching this without directly talking about relationships?

We started with an assumption that teachers already know lots of things and also that there were people who can help them teach the basic skills. The missing ingredient for us in St. Louis was that teachers and parents and the school administrators did not have a feeling of a sense of power to do anything about these things. They felt that everything was always laid on them and they were not able to make any kind of meaningful contribution to that discourse. We decided that the most important thing we could do was to lay this whole problem in the lap of the area superintendent, the principal, the teachers, the parents and the nonacademic personnel. We would come together and spend as much time as we needed to understand what the research was saying and to find better ways that would lead us to something. All of these people had been a part of Title I and a part of lots of other kinds of projects, all of which had been laid on them by somebody from the outside. Now the only thing we did from the outside was to provide some money that would make it possible for them to work together.

James Comer

That was essentially what the Ford Foundation said to us initially. They assumed that the Yale Child Study Center had something that it could offer because of our understanding of group dynamics and child development. But we went into the schools with the notion that we were not going to tell them what to do. We were going to involve that body of people in the schools in dialogue and develop a process that would address the underlying troublesome issues. Our first question was, "What is the mechanism that we can create that will bring all of these people together in a way that they will be empowered again?" In fact, that's where *School Power,* the title of my book, came from. The notion was that you have to empower those people who are powerless for a variety of reasons and bring them together into the governance and management group to plan the program for the school.

To get back to Ron's point about the ability to help people deal with different kinds of problems being a drawback, our feeling is that what we talk about and call mental health is not profound; in fact, most people already know these things intuitively. Most know how to work with partners, colleagues, and kids. The problem we find is that there is no structure in schools to reinforce and strengthen their relationship knowledge and skills; to establish and support a constructive problem solving (and problem preventing) tone and manner. There is too much conflict, too much disagreement, too much hopelessness. As a result, the school is structured and managed in a way that nobody is in a position to do what they already know how to do. If you can create a structure in the system to bring support for staff, parents, and students, then you can address those problems that lead to resistance without great knowledge of human development. It is not profound stuff that I am talking about.

Most know how to work with partners, colleagues, and kids. The problem we find is that there is no structure in schools to reinforce and strengthen their relationship knowledge and skills; . . .

Ronald Edmonds

We do create in every school a group that includes the principals, partners, teachers, paraprofessionals, and all the other parties to the enterprise. The only difference I think, Jim, is your concept of empowerment, because it is those men and women who both represent the school and make the decisions about what to do. The limit is that we give them chores that do not explicitly address the phenomenon of dynamics. That may be what saves the designs for school improvement, what makes them work as well as they do, is the fringe benefit that grows out of convening this group of people who preside over the enterprise.

I would argue that it is the process of bringing those *people together* that is responsible for the success, even more than what you actually do. You would argue that it's *what* you do.

James Comer

All right, I think this is the key difference. You see, we're together in our thinking. We're doing exactly the same thing in that we have that planning group as the key to our program, but I use the work "key." You said "fringe benefit," and that is the difference.

I would argue that it is the process of bringing those people together that is responsible for the success, even more than what you actually do. You would argue that it's *what* you do.

. . . when I think about the process I don't think about it in group dynamics terms. I only think about it in organizational terms—in the knowledge that all the parties to the organization have to be represented or you don't have a chance of advancing the agenda.

Ronald Edmonds

You may be right. When we convened those groups in New York, in the first year, some principals brought teams of people who had been elected; some principals brought team members who had volunteered; and other principals insisted on appointing team members. We said at the outset that we prefer that they be either elected or volunteers and that the principal be able to certify that they formed a reasonable representation of the school and community. And we fought the principals who insisted on appointing teams. A year later we converted every one of the appointed groups. When we brought them together, we would listen to the dynamics. It was so clear that the groups that had been appointed were having enormously greater difficulties than the others that all the principals switched to volunteers or elected groups. By 1980, there were no more appointed groups.

The only difference, Jim, is that when I think about the process I don't think about it in group dynamics terms. I only think about it in organizational terms—in the knowledge that all the parties to the organization have to be represented or you don't have a chance of advancing the agenda.

James Comer

I agree with that on an organizational basis, but I also think about the dynamics. And the dynamics are very, very volatile. What you have done when you bring parents, teachers, administrators, and aides, and all other participants in that enterprise together is restore the kind of consensus that existed in a natural way, in the pre-1940 school, when parents, teachers, and administrators met each other in the A&P store and other places. They knew each other enough to trust each other, or at least their expectations were clear. They didn't necessarily like each other, but they had a commitment to civility because of that kind of interaction. Mass communication and high mobility have separated parents and staff in a way that allows doubt, distrust, alienation, and anger to creep in, and all of that is the basis for dissension and disagreement, lack of cooperation, and negative feelings about people in schools. When you bring that group of people together you restore that commitment to getting along with each other, but you can't just say it. We don't go in the schools and say, you must get along with each other, or that we are really doing this to get along with each other. We say we want to create a climate in this school that makes it a good place to be and a good place for everybody to work. But the whole purpose of the social climate is to facilitate the academic climate.

. . . restore the kind of consensus that existed in a natural way, in the pre-1940 school, when parents, teachers, and administrators met each other in the A&P store . . .

Most of all we are bringing governance and management to a system that generally ignores both. Creating a climate for planning and achievement requires attention to governance and management. My feeling is that the major problem in schools is the absence of an effective management structure. The organizational structure that puts a single principal in charge of a school building is no longer effective. We've done such a good job in this society of making everybody feel that they have a right to say something, that they tend to do what they want to do—unless they have a say and a consensus is developed.

Most of all we are bringing governance and management to a system that generally ignores both.

You have to be an unusual person, a gifted person, or a tyrant to get that kind of control. What we do is to bring people together in a way that they establish and become supporters of the school mission. It is the management and support for that system that grows out of the dynamic interaction of people that then makes everything else possible.

I think we are saying the same thing; it is just the emphasis that makes the difference. You say that it is in the way they do their job in teaching, and I say that they are able to do their job because a mechanism exists within the system that decreases the friction, the resistance, and the interference. When you decrease that, then they can do their job.

Issue Two

Creating a Climate Conducive to Learning

- Let's define climate
- Assessing existing conditions
- Mental health teams—or liaisons

When moderator John Ervin questions whether a "good school climate" is a necessary accompaniment to academic effectiveness, both Edmonds and Comer elaborate on the dynamics of the process of change. The more they talk, the more they discover that the roles of the mental health workers in the Comer model parallel the roles of the liaisons in the Edmonds model.

Their parley on the use of assessment instruments to measure school climate is provocative and instructive and allows us to appreciate the respect each had for the other's position.

John Ervin

Jim, you state a generalization which seems to me to run counter to what I see in other places. In the broadest sense, we have a musical theater in St. Louis, but we are caught by the star system. They can put on the most fantastic piece of drama and nobody pays any attention to it, but get a name star and they get the place filled. I see in America's young people who are turning to cults the attractiveness of a person, or the personalization, that draws people. In the presence of the depersonalization that has been created by the mass culture there is still that attraction toward a person. It seems to me that some of the most effective turnarounds in schools, in terms of improvement, have sometimes happened because somebody—not necessarily the principal—but somebody in that collective has certain kinds of qualities that pull people. Within the school, somebody has got to be the instructional leader.

Within the school, somebody has got to be the instructional leader.

Ronald Edmonds

I agree with that and I like it. There appear to be several things that make schools work and one may be the strong leader. The other may be a group of teachers. Another may be an unusual parent group. But the most effective planning occurs when you have an effective principal leading that planning group. The beauty of it is that, if you have a management system in a school that is a participatory system, then that school could work with a weak principal, because it allows the strong people to participate. That's where I have disagreed with people who have distorted what you mean by strong leadership to mean an authoritarian, controlling individual. A weak principal who is secure enough or smart enough will allow the people who are good to take leadership roles.

James Comer

But you are not denying the need for a presence of something that provides that.

There has to be a mechanism which allows leadership, whether it be from the teachers, parents, or the principal, to flow and to come into operation, . . .

Ronald Edmonds

Not at all. There has to be a mechanism which allows leadership, whether it be from the teachers, parents, or the principal, to flow and to come into operation, to deal with what you call the powerlessness of people, because there is no mechanism to allow them to exercise their concerns and address the problems they are concerned about. When you have that governance group, that group allows the flow of that leadership to emerge.

John Ervin

As I listen, I hear more similarity between you than even I had recognized. I hear Jim emphasize the idea that the climate has to be there first and the effectiveness will follow. Are you finding that academic effectiveness can exist without "good school climate"? Or does it lead to good climate?

We say that climate is the extent to which the whole environment supports the primary purpose of the enterprise.

Ronald Edmonds

I'll tell you what I mean by climate.

A part of what you will make of my definition is that we can *sanitize* climate. We say that climate is the extent to which the whole environment supports the primary purpose of the enterprise. Therefore, we would discourage any activity that interferes with classroom learning. One of the things that interfere is announcements on the public address system. We would discourage any disorder or disarray in the halls. One of the contributions to effective climate is that all adults are responsible for all students all the time. They must participate in managing all students all the time, no matter where the students are and no matter what the students are doing. Another contribution to effective climate is that it depresses the variability in adult response to misbehaving students. It is antithetical to our design for school improvement if children are able to report that Ms. Smith is lenient and Mr. Jones is harsh. When we say, "depress the variability," we mean that adults have to get together and agree on the rules that run the enterprise, and they all have to enforce those rules all the time. We talk about it explicitly. We say, for example, that the reason you have to pay a lot of attention to the physical environment is to avoid giving children any opportunity, or parents any opportunity, to see evidence of neglect in the physical environment. That is why it matters whether or not you repair a broken window. It has less to do with the window and more to do with the fact that, if it stays broken, you'll see it for a long time, and you'll conclude that nobody cares about the school. I attempt to take all the issues and try to make them as unemotional for me as I can, although all of them clearly have emotional and behavior implications. That's what I meant when I said "sanitize." For my part, that is a very explicit enterprise. That's why, when I talk about climate, I never talk about whether people get along. I talk about the obliga-

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tion to cooperate. I talk about the obligation to have a shared set of professional behaviors to which it is absolutely essential that all subscribe.

. . . when I talk about climate, I never talk about whether people get along. I talk about the obligation to cooperate. I talk about the obligation to have a shared set of professional behaviors to which it is absolutely essential that all subscribe.

James Comer

That is essentially what we do. But we do not say, "You must get along." We talk about the fact that when there is conflict in the building it gets transmitted directly to the children's behavior. If they [children] see Ms. Jones yelling at Ms. Smith, then kids will do the same thing. And the same kinds of concern about the physical environment are there because of the message it sends.

The question, though, is: "Where [in your approach] is information transmitted, and who transmits it?"

Ronald Edmonds

Well, I do it formally. I told you about this tendency of mine to make it tangible. I give every school a set of instruments for evaluating each of the organizational characteristics we deem important. One of the jobs of the committee running this enterprise is to use these instruments to keep tabs on critical elements of school life, including climate.

James Comer

I don't like instruments. I found that, when we started using assessment instruments, everyone focused on the instruments.

OK, here is another place where we differ significantly; not in what we are interested in accomplishing, but the way we go about it. I don't like instruments. I found that, when we started using assessment instruments, everyone focused on the instruments. The instruments were somewhere else for four weeks because of some delays in getting outside people in to do the assessment. Meanwhile, school staff who had already been planning and making progress were sitting around waiting for the instruments to tell them what needed to be done. If you asked any one of those teachers what needed to be done, they would have told you without the assessment instruments.

. . . school staff who had already been planning and making progress were sitting around waiting for the instruments to tell them what needed to be done.

I feel that if your planning group were addressing the issues of the school and establishing priorities and talking about what things you want to happen in that school, you'd get things done, and you'd be less dependent on a piece of paper that tells your planning group what they already know. You create thinkers, thinking about the things we ought to address in our school. The teachers start giving ideas to their representative. They are not dependent on an outside set of instructions or things they ought to be concerned about; they become people who identify in their schools the things that need to be addressed. You create a group of people within the system who believe that it (change) is coming from them, coming from within.

They are addressing the problems of their school, and they are not dealing with the assessment instruments.

However, I don't see the assessment instruments as a serious problem. I just think it is much better to internalize.

Ronald Edmonds

Well, I'll be interested to find out, as the numerous designs proceed, whether or not many of those who began with the instruments will abandon them, just what some of the variations and modification of those instruments will be, and whether or not some who began without them continue to get along without them. I feel sort of laid back on that one.

. . . perhaps some people need an instrument to get started. What is important to me is that people begin to think of themselves as being capable of making their system work . . . through existing mechanisms.

James Comer

And I conceded to the other position when it was introduced in New Haven because, as you pointed out to me, perhaps some people need an instrument to get started. What is important to me is that people begin to think of themselves as being capable of making their system work. They don't have to wait for Ms. Jones down the hall, or a parent or the principal, to make the system work. They themselves can do something to make their system work through existing mechanisms.

Ronald Edmonds

We told the advisory group that, on the basis of our research, effective schools do not have variability in adult response to the children's behavior.

James Comer

OK, I understand that you can do that. We don't say it's data based.

Ronald Edmonds

It seems to me, Jim, in a sense it doesn't matter where it comes from; what matters is whether or not you can get it.

James Comer

I, my status, my credibility, and my persuasiveness derived from a combination of scholarship and. . .

Ronald Edmonds

. . . charisma. . .

James Comer

. . . and administrative experience and the ease with which I can switch back and forth from talking to school people to talking to parents. I think that that is what's critical—not the knowledge that certain things can be useful.

Ronald Edmonds

It's a question of how you get people to pay attention. We both say to a group of people: "We think you have the capacity to do these extraordinary things that you've never done before." You persuade people to subscribe to that notion in ways that are very different from mine. I don't know whether I could get people to subscribe to what I represent if I tried to do it your way.

We both say to a group of people: "We think you have the capacity to do these extraordinary things that you've never done before."

James Comer

We do it by having a mental health person, (maybe I should take out the word mental health) a person from our team on the school advisory council. You have people dropping in on your planning group.

Ronald Edmonds

We call those people *school liaisons.*

James Comer

Our team person helps the school function differently. Eventually the new ways of functioning become internalized to the point that the staff is then doing it themselves. We [our team] now have been out of King School, and out of Brennan School, for two years, and the same basic things go on. There is slippage from time to time; then we go back in, we have little talks; things go back in place because the way of thinking has been internalized within the building.

John Ervin

When you talk, Jim, about the mental health person, the implication of a person with special training, with built-in costs, becomes a barrier. Now,

you talk, Ron, about a school liaison. Would you talk about the differences between these two roles because those two people seem to be important to your interventions? Would you talk about the differences in the kinds of persons who can hold those jobs?

James Comer

I think we again probably are going to come out pretty close. We started with a specialized mental health person. We were learning about the system at the time; it was important for us to learn. But as we continued to be involved, we realized that the kind of information we were putting in to the schools was almost common-sense information. For example, when I described to my mother, who has two years of formal education, what a psychiatrist does, she said she stopped listening because it sounded like "common sense." When we realized that we were using common sense information, we decided to try to work with an educator in that leadership role in the school to transmit that kind of mental health common sense to educators who could then transmit it to other educators.

John Ervin

You may want to get up to mental health focus. It was just that it didn't need to be delivered by specialists.

. . . when I say mental health, I'm talking about mental health from the elementary level that says, when a new kid comes to a school you don't put him directly in a classroom; you give him an orientation.

James Comer

That's right. And when I say mental health, I'm talking about mental health from the elementary level that says, when a new kid comes to a school you don't put him directly in a classroom; you give him an orientation.

John Ervin

Jim, when you say mental health, I almost always translate that to a developmental approach because of my own training, background and interest in child development. So much of what I have heard you talk about is an understanding of children and where they are developmentally—knowledge that all teachers ought to have, but which a lot of them have lost. Is it the words "mental health" that turn so many people off?

James Comer

It is both an understanding of child development and behavior, which I consider a part of mental health; I'm not talking about sick kids. I'm talking

about people functioning well; that's the kind of mental health I'm talking about. Knowledge of child development makes it easier for educators to understand what they do. If you understand that an 8-year-old is more likely to panic in a transfer situation than a 15-year-old, or less likely to be able to tell you what's going on than the 15-year-old, then you can think of how to plan for that. If you understand that every time a kid has a fight, it is not that the kid is bad, but that the kid may have inadequate frustration tolerance. Then you are able to address that issue in a way that is not punitive but aids development. That's the kind of mental health we are talking about—knowledge of child development.

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John Ervin

But it seems to me that there should be within every system a number of people who have those skills.

James Comer

There are. That's one of the points that I wanted to stress. One of the problems is that, at present, those people who are supposed to be using those skills are misused in systems. What you have are social workers and psychologists and special education teachers dealing with two . . . three . . . five children. They would function better if all the teachers and principals in the system had elementary knowledge about how to relate to kids. The mental health people should be used to help them do so, and thereby prevent many problems. This would allow the mental health people to give more time to the more serious behavior problems.

Ronald Edmonds

The easiest way to describe the school liaison people is to tell where they come from and what we train them to do. There are two kinds of school liaison people in these designs. When the system can afford it, we recommend a full-time school liaison, a person available to a school on demand. The liaison assists the committee representing the school in a lot of the work, especially in evaluating the school before an intervention is designed. When the system has full-time school liaisons, as they do in New York, one school liaison person is assigned to a school for a temporary period of time. That person may do the interviews and the observations and the collection of information that portray the school. They may actually write what we call a needs assessment, which is prerequisite to designing an intervention, because all of the interventions are supposed to be tailored to the particular character of the school at the moment we find it. We train those people in the research on school effectiveness and teacher effectiveness. We choose

When the system can afford it, we recommend a full-time school liaison, a person available to a school on demand.

They should be able to support a principal without usurping him or her.

them partly on the basis of their skills and prior experience in staff development and the prediction that they will work well with people. They should be able to support a principal without usurping him or her. They should be in a school for a temporary period, but not make their presence so essential to the environment that the school can't continue to function when they go away. The other kind of school liaison, which is more common, is a person who already has other jobs. These people are chosen to perform this function but they are chosen from among curricular people, instructional people and research and evaluation people. They are chosen to do this kind of thing on an *ad hoc* basis, but they are not full-time and they weren't hired solely for that purpose. This situation is far more usual.

James Comer

How much time do they spend in the school, or are they floating around?

Ronald Edmonds

They tend to get assigned fairly intensively to a school so they may stay there; or they may get assigned to two schools, may stay there for two months or three months, then go away.

James Comer

Let me share a similarity in our program.

John Ervin

And if you can see any differences between them. That would be useful to us, too.

In our program, the social worker from the Yale Child Study Center initially did essentially what your liaison person did.

James Comer

OK. In our program, the social worker from the Yale Child Study Center initially did essentially what your liaison person did. For the part-time liaison person you are talking about, we use consultants. As the planning group moves along and identifies academic concerns they call in consultants that are available, say in math or reading, for short periods of time. We had planned to move in this direction [a liaison person]. Because of a funding problem, we moved quicker that we wanted to. For the last two years we have been without a social worker in the school. We had trained a principal to be the liaison person hoping that he would then be able to work with other principals in the same way. We are going to get more funding

next year, and we will have a liaison person who is with both the Child Study Center and the school system. And we will have an educator, to work with groups of principals who are involved in change efforts and who do what your full-time liaison person does in schools. We also are trying to get inside school consultants, like the area specialists in math and reading, to begin to work differently within the school system. Also we are trying to get the school support people—social workers, psychologists, and others—to begin to work differently and do what you have described as part-time school liaisons.

Ronald Edmonds

Let me tell you how we moved the school liaison to what you call consultants. We have trained every team to produce an encyclopedia of resources. As the liaison works with the committee and makes diagnoses, they reach the point where they need certain things. The design says, first look inside the school district, then look to the intermediate school district. If not there, you look to the neighboring school district, then to the state department of education. If not there, look to the university closest to your school district, and so on. We have caused every one of them to think about the concept of consultation as it applies to actually helping the schools. Start closest to the schools you are working with and move away only in very deliberate circumstances. Don't jump over all those resources that you haven't explored in the past. We don't ask the liaison people to combine both process help and substantive help. But it often turns out that substantive help is needed, and if they only know reading, we may have to find other help in math—or vice versa.

We have trained every team to produce an encyclopedia of resources.

But it is enormously interesting to me that we end up portraying these two roles in similar ways. It is interesting to me that you talk about the committee that represents the school the way I talk about the school committee, and you talk about the function of the mental health person the way I talk about the liaison person.

It is interesting to me that you talk about the committee that represents the school the way I talk about the school committee, and you talk about the function of the mental health person the way I talk about the liaison person.

James Comer

They are very similar.

John Ervin

The only thing I've heard so far is that you, Jim, systematically address issues of climate in a way that Ron does not.

James Comer

I think that is the difference.

. . . The planning group that represents partners, teachers, administrators, and aides asks what it can do to make the school a good place where all will be comfortable.

Let me tell you what we do with climate to see if there are any differences: The planning group that represents partners, teachers, administrators, and aides asks what it can do to make the school a good place where all will be comfortable. One of the first things we do is develop a school calendar for the entire year. That calendar is very important. It used to happen that early in December someone would say, you've got to have a Christmas program for the kids. But nobody was committed to it. It seemed it was not important enough to take time from teaching. When the program was defined as something that would make the school a good place where people would want to come, then such a program became strategy in the achievement of an important goal. It would help the kids, providing an opportunity for them to express themselves; and parents love to see their kids perform. Also, it gave a sense and progression to the year. We were even able to deal with the January and February blahs by scheduling the spring fling at the end of February. Getting ready for the affair generated energy and excitement. The social calendar gave direction, consensus and focus to the school and helped to create an improved climate. The calendar also gave parents a role to play that was not threatening. It brought them into the school. They were planning pot luck suppers and feeling that they had something to contribute. Also we wanted to help the parents develop an overall program. And, the new health team was working with problems of specific children. This is something that now gets done by the school social workers and others within the school, but by reducing specific behavior problems you also improve the climate of the school. That's how we address climate.

John Ervin

Ron, do the same group of people provide direction?

Ronald Edmonds

Yes, that same group of people, but we have subcommittees.

John Ervin

Do the subcommittees provide a way for other people to get some ownership as well as the team?

Ronald Edmonds

That's right. Several teachers serve on the parents' program; several serve on the learning center program, and others on the pupil personnel team; so that everybody is involved in one thing or another. But the work goes on simultaneously. Actually, one issue facilitates the other.

John Ervin

There are differences between your philosophies but you are using many of the same tools, and the emphasis is so similar.

There are differences between your philosophies but you are using many of the same tools, and the emphasis is so similar.

James Comer

We recognize that the thing that helps most with the climate of the school is successful learning. When kids can learn to read and write they stop acting up, and teachers feel better. We are concerned that time-on-task is being identified as a major problem. We argue that one of the reasons that you don't get enough time-on-task is that the school is often so chaotic that teachers don't have time to spend on task. They become part of the chaos. If you can get an orderly system going, then you have a better chance for spending adequate time-on-task. Learning and successful teaching contribute to a productive climate.

When we started in New Haven there was absolute resistance. Our notion was to start in two schools and do something that was so dramatic that nobody could use the "these-kids-can't-learn" excuse as the basis for taking no action. Then we would try to move into the rest of the school system. We were not able to do that until Gerald Tirozzi became the superintendent and began to pay attention to us. And even now, with Tirozzi's support, we still have pockets of resistance. This is due, in part, to financial "cutbacks." Cutbacks generate resistance, fear, and reaction. The reaction, for example, is not to do what the superintendent wants you to do, because you just lost your extra teacher in the building, or your aide or whatever. Even though there still are pockets of resistance, we have now moved from working in two schools to working throughout the system. At the same time there is a program throughout the state for effective schools developed by the State Department of Education.

Our notion was to start in two schools and do something that was so dramatic that nobody could use the "these-kids-can't-learn" excuse as the basis for taking no action.

The State Department program is related to what we are doing and to what is happening across the county—to what others are saying about effective schools and what we were saying about effective schools. There is a climate now that has overcome the literature that came out of the early 70s. We were developing as a program when that literature came along, and we have models that people are now paying attention to. However, despite that literature and despite the model, we still face resistance and must deal with

it. My feeling is that we can deal with it by continuing to have successful programs; to continue to move successful programs from two to four schools, to six, eight, and ten schools. Eventually the success breaks down the resistance.

John Ervin

Suppose, in your strategy to get two effective schools, analyses showed that one was effective and one wasn't. Would that finding block the extension of your program?

James Comer

If our approach had not worked in a second school, and we could not have shown clearly that there were some reasons for not being successful which had nothing to do with our approach, we might have been in a bit of trouble. But fortunately, the second school that we went into worked better that the first school.

Issue Three

Categorical Programs

- Things to be learned from special education
- A different role for Chapter 1 teachers

Comer and Edmonds express strong opinions about the kinds of services that special education teachers and remedial assistance teachers should provide. Their views about how these teachers could become integrated within the total academic program comprise a radical departure from the way most instructional programs are organized.

John Ervin

Is there a movement in this country right now? All of a sudden you can't go into any city without finding a school effectiveness strategy. Sometimes they are data based and sometimes they are not. What do you think is going on?

Ronald Edmonds

One interesting example is that the Federal Court in Benton Harbor ordered Jim Comer's *School Power* as the educational treatment to accompany the desegregation of the schools. It is an extraordinary event. I think it means that the evidence of the educability of poor children has advanced so far that even the judiciary is persuaded. Ten years ago it would have been inconceivable for a judge to order any program into force, based on the premise that all the kids in the system are educable.

John Ervin

What I see out there is something which doesn't necessarily mandate interventions on the basis of the educability of all the children. It seems to me, we are in an environment of declining resources, and there is pressure to do more with less.

James Comer

But the effect of "more with less" tends to cause people to pay attention to the models that have been developed. Take special education, for example. Many people feel that many of those programs shouldn't exist; that children would not end up in those programs if the regular school programs had addressed their behavior problems, their coping problems, and their learning problems, earlier.

The need to cut down on and avoid more expensive services—to do more for less—caused the school system to pay more attention to our model.

In New Haven there was pressure for even more expensive special education programs. In the two schools in which we were working, they haven't referred any children to the more expensive special education centers, because the children who need the services are being served at the building level. The need to cut down on and avoid more expensive

services— to do more for less—caused the school system to pay more attention to our model.

Ronald Edmonds

I think there are two points. One, what Jim and I are talking about does not imply any permanent increase in school resources. It does not imply any increase in pupil expenditure and does not depend on dramatic sums of supportive money. That is number one.

. . . schools have the capacity to be instructionally effective for a much greater range of their pupil population than they are at the present time. A lot of kids get referred to special ed because they have been in instructionally ineffective classrooms.

The key is that data base. An analysis of a portion of the population referred for special education means a lot of things. It means that schools have the capacity to be instructionally effective for a much greater range of their pupil population than they are at the present time. A lot of kids get referred to special ed because they have been in instructionally ineffective classrooms. Even if they *are* eligible for special ed, that may not mean they ought to be referred to special ed, because they might be better off *not* being in special ed.

The second thing to talk about is the effectiveness of special education itself. If you were a parent, I would have to tell you that your child's chances of graduating from high school may be greater if you don't tell the school system that your child is eligible for special education. Your prospects for high school graduation from special education are less than they would be if you had never been referred in the first place.

Most programs of special ed do not set out to teach children academic skills. Not too long ago I was meeting with all the administrators in a school system in the Southwest, and I said that one of the characteristics of a system to support effective schooling was the need for a uniform standardized curriculum that didn't vary at all for any portion of the population. The woman who was the director of special ed said she thought that was "grotesque." The man who was the director of Title I said he thought it inappropriate to expect Title I-eligible children to master the same curriculum as all other children. Then the woman who was director of special ed said she thought it inappropriate to measure children in special ed in terms of their academic progress. That means that she has children in special ed for whom she is doing many things, but it is not her intent to prepare them academically to graduate from high school. It is not how she measures what she does.

When a kid is put in special ed because there is something wrong with him or her, the teachers interpret this to mean that this child is not going to learn.

A powerful self-fulfilling prophecy takes place. When a kid is put in special ed because there is something wrong with him or her, the teachers interpret this to mean that this child is not going to learn. Teachers do some other things to make them happy. In fact, they protect them.

James Comer

Let me talk about how we responded to that and, at the same time, deal with my concern about strong leadership and how people have come to think of that as the authoritarian principal. We felt that classroom teachers should have some of the special ed teachers' skills in order to provide kids with basic academic skills. Very often, special ed teachers pay attention to special skills and do not pay attention to teaching basic academic skills. That occurred in our program when we went into the second school where there was a strong principal. He would look at problems—children in need of services—think about his resources and assign people to what he considered the proper places. When we came in, we opened up the leadership and involved other people—the learning center teacher, the resource representative, a parent, and others. When kids were referred, the team got together and asked how to meet their needs in a better way. Where resources were tied to categorical programs, those teachers could only serve designated kids. And there were other obstacles to providing the best service. We suggested screening all the kids to find out their needs, and decide how best to utilize the available resources. They developed a way of working to avoid taking the kids out of the classroom more than once a day, for any activity, and using resources for all kids. We got special permission to do that and to set up the learning center to allow the special education teacher to help all of the teachers develop some of the special education skills. This reduced the number of children who needed special education services. And because the general education teachers were stressing the academic basics, the special education teacher also "thought basics."

Where resources were tied to categorical programs, those teachers could only serve designated kids.

In addition to resolving that problem of having support staff off in the corner with a few kids, this new approach brought support staff skills into the mainstream of the school for all the teachers. This progress occurred because the "strong principal" did not make all the decisions. It occurred because the "strong principal" opened up, asked how to solve this problem, and invited other "leadership" in the school to show the way.

. . . this new approach brought support staff skills into the mainstream of the school for all the teachers.

Ronald Edmonds

You know, it's interesting you say that, because we've found a similar effect occurring in an enormously different way. Our program advises all participating schools that there should be no pull-out of any kind for any

Our position is that there should be no supportive instructional personnel in the school who are not subservient to the principal and the classroom teacher.

purpose. Our rationale for being opposed to pull-out is that it eliminates the principal's ability to coordinate instruction. Our position is that there should be no supportive instructional personnel in the school who are not subservient to the principal and the classroom teacher. Furthermore, instructional activity is to occur only if

- The principal knows about it.
- The presentation is done in the regular classroom.
- The supportive person makes the supportive activity conform to the teacher's overall design of instruction.
- The lessons are focused on the diagnosis of students' needs.
- The teaching is to the whole group in a way that will simultaneously address the eligible kids and, at the same time, offer things that will engage the rest of the kids.

One of the effects of this position is that it does eliminate the Title I role. And it eliminates all those other situations where people come into a classroom and take seven kids out for 50 minutes, and bring them back. I mention this because I think the practice produces an effect similar to yours— even though our rationale for doing it is enormously different.

What we found was that some of the most versatile and effective teachers in the system were the special education teachers.

James Comer

I see your rationale. Let me ask you a question about it. Don't you have to look at the reality in a local school setting? What we found was that some of the most versatile and effective teachers in the system were the special education teachers. Incidentally, I believe this is because they can address affective and cognitive issues.

Ronald Edmonds

We systematically set out to teach the principals the behaviors we want them to manifest, and we struggle with the best way to do that with individual principals.

That *was* the case, and what we did was give those special education teachers the opportunity to rise to leadership positions within the planning group. Our approach to principals is that we try to tailor our treatment to each principal's style and disposition. We don't always succeed, but we try. In some cases, we recommend assigning to that principal, on a one-to-one basis, a professorial type to stay for several days to teach this or that. In other cases, we assign for two weeks fellow principals who already have a set of behaviors we want this principal to learn. One of the reasons for doing a needs assessment is to tailor the treatment of the disparate parts of the school, and the principal is always regarded as critical. We systematically set out to teach the principals the behaviors we want them to manifest, and we struggle with the best way to do that with individual principals.

We try to ask in these designs:

- Who is the person who already knows how to do what we want that principal to learn?
- Who is the person who knows that and is going to be most compatible with this individual?

So they never go to lectures in that sense.

I think that you and I should undertake, in some more systematic way, to better understand the nature of the programs of intervention we represent. The similarities and differences I would look for are those things that I could modify or add to the designs that I do—that would conform to some of the implications of what we've been talking about all along. You tend to emphasize more attention to the *processes* of change and the *dynamics* of change, and I pay less attention to that and more to the substantive basis of change, leaving the dynamics alone.

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Issue Four

Change Strategies: Process and Substance

- Where do we focus our efforts?
- Management is important

Whatever the essential differences, the philosophies of Edmonds and Comer are probably best articulated in their discussion about staff development. Ervin's questions provide the stimulus. He asks if district leaders should be trained to lead school improvement efforts, or if change agents from outside the district would work directly in the schools. Comer opts to work directly with teachers and parents, stating that his focus is on the process of change. Edmonds states that his focus is on the substance of change, that he accepts "enormous variability in the designs for intervention" and prefers working with district leaders.

John Ervin

Given what you just said, is it more important for the focus of attention (which ought to come from the two of you and from funding sources like the Danforth Foundation) to be on helping people to understand how to do staff development, or on the direct intervention in schools with teachers and principals? Should we at Danforth, for example, bring the instructional leaders from the six St. Louis schools to spend some time with you, on the assumption that they will then go back to their schools to set the stage for the development of the intervention, or should we bring the intervenors directly into the school?

Ronald Edmonds

They are two different things.

James Comer

It also brings into focus the way each of us has moved in a training area. Ron has moved in to give people the substance of change. And we've moved in to give people the process of change.

Ronald Edmonds

Let me respond by saying I think it reasonable to separate and to talk about process and substance, but I would say I would be a lot more optimistic about educators, armed with proper substance, sorting out for themselves the process and the dynamics of change, than the other way around.

John Ervin

My question didn't have to do with separating substance from process. My question originally had to do with who would be the target of the effort. Should the focus be on people who are going to be what you are calling

change agents in a district, or on the people who are in the local schools now?

My druthers are that you fix your attention on the people who have line authority in the schools—the men and women who already make cumulative decisions around the enterprise, . . .

If you can persuade those people to conceive of what they do differently, you've come very close to making a permanent change in the way the system operates.

Ronald Edmonds

My druthers are that you fix your attention on the people who have line authority in the schools—the men and women who already make cumulative decisions around the enterprise, because that would be the most permanent contribution to the system. If you can persuade those people to conceive of what they do differently, you've come very close to making a permanent change in the way the system operates.

I have to "fess up" to the fact that I feel very secure in saying it is essential that schools come to acquire certain characteristics if they are going to be effective. That's easy. What we know least about are the means by which they should do that. That's why I have to be so liberal in accepting enormous variability in the designs for intervention. We have a much firmer grip on the substantive portrayal of the way the organization is supposed to operate than we have on telling you in St. Louis that you ought to do it the way they did in that place over there. We just don't know that. And now I think our chances of learning more about that are incredibly better than they have been, because in a few years all these enterprises will start to turn out some results. Then we are going to get a much better feeling for what worked the best and what didn't, and what they did share and what they didn't share, and so forth.

But a part of my insecurity about the whole question of process is that I think you are compelled to be liberal. Jim Comer describes an enormously persuasive, demonstrably effective process of school intervention, but I don't think Jim would argue that this is the only way to get what he wants. He happened to do it that way. I don't argue that there is only one way to get what I want. We teach people two different things: 1) We teach them the minimum school behaviors that they must obtain. 2) We, at least, introduce them to the range of teacher behaviors most consistently associated with diminished discipline problems, heightened achievement, and better organization. Then we go on to teach them a repertoire of designs for doing those things. We leave them to decide whether they will use one of these designs, or another one that they have thought of themselves—because, we have to confess, we are in no position to tell them that their chances for success are best if they do it our way. We know that there are some who were coerced into participating, and the outcome for them may not look as good as the outcome for those who volunteered to participate.

James Comer

I would agree with Ron that there is a lot we don't know. But I think we also know more that we are utilizing. My understanding is that the basic problem in schools is that they are not managed. People come in and they teach; people come in and they carry out administrative activities. They do not manage the system. When you have a nonmanaged system, it is chaotic. We also suspect very strongly that, in this day and age, management must be participatory to some extent. Our work suggests that resistance is going to be reduced if you have a process that involves people in that decision-making.

My understanding is that the basic problem in schools is that they are not managed. People come in and they teach; people come in and they carry out administrative activities. They do not manage the system.

Getting back to the point about whom to focus on, I think that one must work with all the people in a system to help them learn how to go through the process of change. Although I acknowledge that there is a certain substance or content that is important, the process is more important. You can have information or excellent content that you cannot use, or use effectively, because of the attitudes, climate, or ways of working in a system.

Sometimes it is easier to focus on process issues first. Both school personnel and the parents have the perception that teachers and principals have the content; they don't need content. I have had a half dozen principals say to me that they don't know how to do the process needed for specific activities like parent involvement. They are comfortable saying that. Teachers are comfortable saying that. But in no way are they comfortable saying that they don't know how to teach these kids.

If you don't have a procedure for dealing with behavior problems in some kind of systematic way in your school, that is poor management. If you don't have a procedure for establishing your academic goals for the year; and if you don't have a strategy for doing that on a yearly basis, a way of monitoring that, a time set up to look at your findings and modify your program, that's poor management.

John Ervin

My sense is that there is a lack of skill in both the content area and the process area. As a result, educational administrators are in a very troubled and rough situation. What does that mean to all of us?

Ronald Edmonds

If you do not have a procedure in your school for developing an activities calendar for the whole year, that is part of poor management. If you don't have a procedure for dealing with behavior problems in some kind of systematic way in your school, that is poor management. If you don't have a procedure for establishing your academic goals for the year; and if you don't have a strategy for doing that on a yearly basis, a way of monitoring that, a time set up to look at your findings and modify your program, that's poor management. And most schools, or many schools, don't have that. Even lots of suburban schools don't have that kind of systematic management process.

What do you do with transfers? Many of our city schools have a 50 percent turnover of kids a year. Do you have a procedure for dealing with transfers? Most schools don't. A good manager works out all of those things, a system for handling everything that goes on in the building in a most efficient and effective way.

The people who get hurt most in a system that is not functioning well are those people who have potential, but, because of prior experience, do not develop needed attention skills, discipline and motivation to concentrate and to focus on the academics in a chaotic system.

John Ervin

Why is this missing in schools?

James Comer

It's missing primarily because educational administrators went in the social science direction and tried to be scholars in the academic tradition, rather than going in the business management direction—case study and the like. Also, in the 40s and 50s, in particular, scientific and technological gains put a focus on content that led people in the direction of methods for passing on content, rather than in the direction of systems management. Kids who come from backgrounds where they are organized and motivated, and who see a future out there will survive one way or another in a chaotic system. The people who get hurt most in a system that is not functioning well are those people who have potential, but, because of prior experience, do not develop needed attention skills, discipline and motivation to concentrate and to focus on the academics in a chaotic system.

. . . as we broaden this sense of what the school ought to be about, we find we can not survive without a management system.

John Ervin

It is also because we have defined the purposes of schools so narrowly, that we thought we could survive without a management system; but as we broaden this sense of what the school ought to be about, we find we can not survive without a management system. When I asked principals, a year and a half after they started in our project, what they did to get where they were, one principal said that whenever he asked teachers to do something different, they spent all their time telling him why they couldn't do it. Now as they've come through this process, he has found one little thing that made it possible to change; he modified the day's schedule so that all the teachers at a particular level had a free period at the same time. Then they could schedule team meetings, because they were all free at the same time. The arrangement, which you call management, made it possible for them to work together at the same time without having to do it on their own time or bootleg the time.

But it seems to me that we've not defined the situation in such a way that looking at management was part of the process. There is an inadequate focus on management, because if the mission is very narrow and rigid we

don't have to worry about creating management structures. It seems to me that management gets related to function.

James Comer

I feel that the mission of the school has to be more than improving the academic achievement. Certainly that has to be the most important goal. But given the fact that many low-income children are already on a downhill course, they must learn how to do things socially, and how to handle themselves in an acceptable way. They have to develop certain kinds of interpersonal skills. You can go into the elementary schools and they look pretty good; kids look very good, they behave, and even though they have academic problems, by and large, they look pretty good. Walk over to the the high schools and see what happens. You have absolute chaos. You have serious problems. My feeling is that you have to address social behavior issues in elementary schools. Your best chance of addressing them is in schools that function well. Where there is a good climate of relationships, there is academic achievement, and you can accomplish the business of socializing kids and making academic gains at the same time. One need not interfere with the other.

We did it with what we call the "Social Skills Curriculum for Inner City Children." We took free or elective time periods to socialize the kids systematically. When kids wrote letters to the mayor as part of the language arts lesson, it was important to be a good speller and a good writer. But also they were learning that you write a business letter on a certain kind of paper—you don't just use a yellow sheet of paper. One of the things that drives me crazy is to look at black kids from low-income backgrounds (and, sorry to say, too many of them from middle-income backgrounds also) write important papers on yellow sheets, turn up late for meetings, exhibit poor planning, and a variety of things that will make it impossible for them to break out of the structures of their environment. For me, it is very important to teach basic social skills as well. And we've been able to do this, not only without interfering with basic academic skills, but facilitating such learning in the process of teaching social skills.

When kids wrote letters to the mayor as part of the language arts lesson, it was important to be a good speller and a good writer. But also they were learning that you write a business letter on a certain kind of paper you don't just use a yellow sheet of paper.

John Ervin

Could I go back to management, because I agree so completely with what you just said, Jim? What I relate to in your management model is your sense that a management team can make both the socialization and the academic progress happen effectively. Currently, in our society and in our schools, the single manager model cannot be as effective. The authoritarian, strong, managing principal seems to be able to create academic instructional

effectiveness, at least for a while, because it may be easier to do it this way. It may be cheaper; it may be shorter.

If you want to modify an organization in any way that is remotely permanent, then you must share authority.

Ronald Edmonds

What we have to tell people, in all honesty, is that it is possible to do these things autocratically. The limitation we teach them is that those changes are rarely, if ever, permanent institutional changes. They are not likely to live any longer than the autocrat who presides over them. If you want to modify an organization in any way that is remotely permanent, then you must share authority. But it is possible to have an authoritarian, pluralistically structured entity, too. Three people can be as authoritarian as one. Authority must be representative; that is, everybody involved in the system has a task—parents, teachers, administrators, aides, and support service people—are represented on the governing group. We say you've got to be careful not to make it too large. We also say that you have to be careful not to paralyze the principal. That is out of bounds. And then we have to work with the principal on a kind of one-to-one basis to help principals who tend to be authoritarian see the benefits of having parents and others involved.

Issue Five

Disaggregating Data

- Using achievement data to portray schools
- Reporting the numbers

One of Edmonds' lasting contributions is his influence on the portrayal of achievement scores for low-income children. In this conversation with Comer, Edmonds fervently describes his experiences with superintendents and the press, as he introduces the method of disaggregating data by social class subgroups. For Edmonds, the disaggregation of data is the most compelling impetus for change: "Whenever a school sees those numbers either stay the same or fall, that is the impetus, whether I am there or not."

The issue marks a point of divergence between the two, as Comer becomes the questioning listener, the clinician, and Edmonds becomes the scholar/researcher.

Ronald Edmonds

Let me get aggressive for a minute. I want to describe what I think is the most powerful thing we do, and it hasn't been mentioned. I don't think Jim does it, and I really want to see what you all make of it. It is my judgement that the most radical change we have made in the 21 largest school districts in the state of Michigan is we have persuaded every one of them to take the following steps. Every superintendent has agreed.

We taught them the methodology. Each school district will take each one of its schools and disaggregate its pupil population into low-income children and middle-income children on the basis of their performance on standardized measures of achievement. They will say of School A: As of September of 1982, among the low-income children, 50 percent of the low-income children and 90 percent of the middle-income children demonstrated mastery; of School B: 60 percent of the low-income and 99 percent of middle-income children demonstrated mastery; of School C: 40 percent of the low-income and 89 percent of the middle-income children demonstrated mastery, and so on. Every one of them has agreed that they will do this. That is part of the reason why we wanted the director of research, testing, and evaluation to be part of the team. This is a radically different way of portraying achievement in the schools.

Each school district will take each one of its schools and disaggregate its pupil population into low-income children and middle-income children on the basis of their performance on standardized measures of achievement.

This is a radically different way of portraying achievement in the schools.

John Ervin

What do you do with schools that don't have middle-income students?

Ronald Edmonds

I'll tell you in a second.

Our participating superintendents have come back and said they've discovered that their least instructionally effective schools enroll the greatest number of middle-class kids. Furthermore, the measure of gain for

. . . they can only portray themselves as becoming increasingly effective if they can annually demonstrate that these numbers are going up.

all the schools is the same—to increase the percentage of mastery, no matter what the process is. No matter what they do, they can only portray themselves as becoming increasingly effective if they can annually demonstrate that these numbers are going up. You know what that says to principals? It says you are running a school that is 75 percent middle class, and you have historically enjoyed this great reputation. But the mastery levels of that 75 percent of middle class kids were so high that the aggregate portrayal of achievement in the school obscured the fact that more than half of the low-income kids were failing. I think this single change [of disaggregation] is probably as profound as anything else we've done.

To answer your question about how to do this if you've got a homogeneous, low-income school: We ask, what is the district level of mastery as a whole for low-income kids? Suppose it is 60 percent for the district as a whole; and for this homogeneously low-income school, it is 59 percent. The point is, we only need to generate this number once in this way, because from then on they must all produce an annual increase that is to be publicly announced. That is the most fundamental measure of what they are doing. And while we want schools to report on the process they are using, and we want schools to report on changes in teacher behavior and changes in principal behavior and changes in quality of interaction with parents, and all those other measures, achievement is the most fundamental measure. No matter what else schools do, if they cannot report an annual increase in achievement, they cannot be portrayed as increasing their instructional effectiveness.

And while we want schools to report on the process they are using, and we want schools to report on changes in teacher behavior and changes in principal behavior and changes in quality of interaction with parents, and all those other measures, achievement is the most fundamental measure.

James Comer

I have smiles, because Ron is the scholar-researcher and I am the clinician. I was not interested in the numbers, as such, to add to the data base. We said we did not want to know who was low-income and who was middle-income. We just noticed that the achievement was skewed this way. And so we went in and made our intervention and when we got through, the achievement was skewed in a positive way. And we know that it is instructionally effective, because we moved the kids out of the lower quartile into the middle quartile. We were concerned because they were not in the higher quartile. We did the same thing without asking those questions, partly because when principals look at such data they become very defensive. They give all kinds of excuses and all kinds of reasons why you can't. It becomes much more difficult to work with such a high level of resistance. So we don't even talk about who ranks where, we just go in and help improve performance. Then we looked at it, and then they were convinced that something has happened with these kids. That's what I mean by taking a clinical approach—taking an action based on your understanding of how to move the kids, but also on how to deal with people who have responsibilities for those kids.

Let me give you an example. One of the new principals we are working with said, "The kids we were working with at the other school did all right, because they are from a higher socioeconomic group." (That is not true.) But then I pointed out that our other participating school serves a housing project and is doing very well. He said, "Oh well! that's a low-rise housing project. We serve a high-rise housing project." That is what I mean by the kind of resistance that you are dealing with.

John Ervin

Let me just say one thing that is just the opposite. When Ron started to work with our principals they did not believe that he could do what he said he could and [later] they didn't believe he had done it. They kept giving all the kinds of excuses for why they weren't able to do this. He said at one point, "Take the best school you have in St. Louis, and look at that school in terms of all the qualities that people usually use when talking about the best schools; merit scholars, attendance in college, etc. etc." Take the school and compare it to the school that is always down at the bottom. Now go look at that top-ranking school and look at what that school does with the pupils in its population who are just like the pupils you teach. That becomes for us the measure of that school. My principals said, "Well I'll be damned."

. . . if this portrayal or that score makes you feel insecure or inadequate, here are five people whose primary function is to teach you what you need to know in order to raise the number."

Ronald Edmonds

But Jim, part of what we have said allows the superintendents to commit themselves to this so that superintendents can now go back and say to their principals, "I'm portraying your school tomorrow in this disaggregated way. And I will look at you next year in terms of whether or not you can increase that left hand." They also said something else, "For any of you who don't think you can raise that number by yourself, there are five people in this school district whose job it is to help you do that. So if this portrayal or that score makes you feel insecure or inadequate, here are five people whose primary function is to teach you what you need to know in order to raise the number."

James Comer

What you've done and the way you've done it is one way to go. And I agree that it could be effective. When you said earlier that the authoritarian administrator could be effective, I agree with that. I take the position that if you can bring about effectiveness without having to call attention to the fact that people are ineffective, then that's a better way to do it.

I take the position that if you can bring about effectiveness without having to call attention to the fact that people are ineffective, then that's a better way to do it.

"This approach does not require us to portray our schools as good or bad. It merely requires us to say that our goal is to make all of our schools more effective than they were, and here's the measure."

Ronald Edmonds

What we say to each administrator is that we are not going to portray any of you as being effective or ineffective. We say that all of *you* are going to portray *yourselves* from now on as more effective. To say that you are *more* effective than you *were* makes no statement about how effective you were. We merely want you to report annually that this year your school is more effective than it was last year. Next year your school will be more effective than it is this year. We have told the superintendents not to do what some superintendents have done—bludgeon principals. Merely say to principals: "This approach does not require us to portray our schools as good or bad. It merely requires us to say that our goal is to make all of our schools more effective than they were, and here's the measure."

James Comer

I must say though, Ron, that I've looked at places where they have talked about becoming more instructionally effective, but they had a feeling that, if they were told to become more effective, they were being called "ineffective."

Ronald Edmonds

Strategically, whether or not portraying a school as ineffective is psychologically good for that school is an internal question that I think is important. Nationally, however, we are at a time when the public does not allow anybody to believe that the public schools are effective. It seems to me that the question could be partly recast. What do we need to do politically to ensure the most rapid movement toward application of behaviors and skills and strategies that we know make schools effective for the largest possible group of people? I would like to turn attention back to the tactics of mass school development strategies. I think, Jim, that we are stuck with standardized measures of achievement. That is the principal basis for portraying public schools in the U.S. We are stuck with that for the foreseeable future. Given that, I prefer to use it, not avoid it.

James Comer

What would happen if we called on the press to disaggregate reading scores in their reporting? Instead of the *New York Times* reporting thousands of schools on an aggregate basis, they could add this dimension.

Ronald Edmonds

Let me give you an explicit illustration of what it means. A few weeks ago, a Lansing [Michigan] newspaper reported the Michigan Educational Assessment Program results for the state of Michigan. And it said in the headline, "The Lansing Schools once again score enormously lower than the East Lansing Schools," and went on to draw the usual portrait than implied that the East Lansing schools were incredibly more effective that the Lansing schools. I asked, what it would look like if, rather than reporting the single number, they reported four quartiles, with mastery a score in the fourth quartile. And they reported that East Lansing put 87 percent of its kids in the fourth quartile and Lansing put 71 percent of its kids in the fourth quartile.

James Comer

Essentially the same thing.

Ronald Edmonds

Right. Then they went on to portray [the school] on this basis, and the headlines and the story talked about the fact that the East Lansing school system was dramatically superior to the Lansing one. Then I asked all of them what it would look like if, instead of reporting the numbers this way, we reported that, of the 15 percent low-income kids in East Lansing, only 40 percent of them scored in the fourth quartile; and, of the 60 percent low income kids in Lansing, 60 percent of them scored in the fourth quartile? That would mean that Lansing is a more instructionally effective school system than East Lansing.

James Comer

Among those people who consider the education of low-income kids important, that is significant. But those people who don't care what happens will come up with all kinds of rationales such as, "What do you expect? Don't you expect the low-income kids to score lower? They can't do any better than that."

Ronald Edmonds

But that is the point of the whole discourse of the educability of the low-income population. That's the point that effective schools demonstrate: No, we don't expect poor kids to do poorly.

That's the point that effective schools demonstrate: No, we don't expect poor kids to do poorly.

James Comer

It deals with the feelings of the educators who have been trying to educate kids in low-income schools which have been labeled as poor systems. There is low morale in those systems, and if it helps the principals in those systems to believe that you can improve the performance of kids, that's valuable. But until we have the evidence that you can improve the performance, just saying so is not enough.

. . . "I expect you to move your low-income kids from here to there; and if you don't think you can, I have these people to help you do it."

Ronald Edmonds

But all 21 of the Michigan superintendents that I worked with said to their principals, "I expect you to move your low-income kids from here to there; and if you don't think you can, I have these people to help you do it." They did, but that assumption was not made on the basis of what you just said. The data in that form don't say to you that it is possible for you to do that, or that the kids move that way. All the data say is that Lansing did a better job of educating low-income kids than East Lansing did.

. . . I point out to them that we do have some schools in which 90 percent of the middle-income kids demonstrate mastery and 90 percent of the low-income kids do too.

But I'm saying that many people, within the system, will still say that low-income kids can't do very well and can't do as well as middle-income kids. That's why it's important to be able to point out that there are some schools in which these two proportions are identical. That's why, when they press me, I point out to them that we do have some schools in which 90 percent of the middle-income kids demonstrate mastery and 90 percent of the low-income kids do too.

James Comer

That's a piece of evidence!

Ronald Edmonds

Well that's a part of what we teach, and then we try to go on from there and ask how they are able to do that. We say to the superintendents that they will have an absolutely effective school when the two numbers are the same. But we caution them, for the moment, to leave that alone and not talk about whether your school is absolutely effective or absolutely ineffective. Talk only about the fact that you should aim for all of them to be more effective.

James Comer

Now we're back together again, because that's what we do. We don't even look at what income groups we're dealing with. We just assume that the kids can learn.

Ronald Edmonds

Let me tell you why I mention this. Once you persuade the school system to portray itself in this way, the data show that some schools in the city already come close to this standard, and they permit parents to ask the question, "Since this test measures achievement for children from identical backgrounds, why is School B so much more effective than School A?" They are the same kinds of kids, with the same backgrounds, and same color. The answer comes in terms of the way the school behaves, not from differences among kids. The data allow us to say something else. From now on, when you portray this school system, we want you to portray it in a lot of ways. One way is whether or not your school's effectiveness is annually increasing proportionately. Some principals may take this to mean from 50 to 51; some may take it to mean from 50 to 70. Principals love this. And the reason they love it is because, given what we have already undertaken to teach them, they think they can do this. And it gives them leverage. They sincerely believe they can do this.

From now on, when you portray this school system, we want you to portray it in a lot of ways. One way is whether or not your schools' effectiveness is annually increasing proportionately.

James Comer

Let me say that I see the value of what you are talking about for a different body of people—our newspapers and public relations people in the city of New Haven.

Ronald Edmonds

Now I'll give you another reason, Jim. You are the guru of your own approach. My interest is to answer the question, "When you are not present, what drives that enterprise?" When I am not there, what will regenerate the impetus to use that school committee and to acknowledge the necessity of paying attention to climate, and all the rest of it? When a school sees that those numbers either stay the same or fall, that is the impetus that compels them to acknowledge they have to do something, whether I am there or not.

James Comer

I believe that the success of the committee (representative governance and management) drives the enterprise. They, too, look at numbers, and they get very concerned when there is slippage of any kind, whether it is normal

I believe that the success of the committee (representative governance and management) drives the enterprise.

fluctuation or not. But it is an ongoing internal process that we use after they become comfortable in looking at themselves. It is not something that we use in the beginning to convince them they ought to be doing something.

Ronald Edmonds

Well, my interest then is technical. I ask myself, what part of this design says that no matter where you implement it, it will drive itself if it has this characteristic.

James Comer

The question I think you have to ask is, what actually happens? That needs to be looked at.

Ronald Edmonds

Well I don't know.

James Comer

Does it really drive the enterprise or does it cause people to become defensive? Now it may cause the superintendents to get very excited but, at the school level, does it cause the teachers . . .?

. . . it causes the principals of the schools to get excited because the superintendents have told them that they're going to be measured in terms of whether they can raise the numbers each year-no matter where they work.

Ronald Edmonds

Well, it causes the principals of the schools to get excited because the superintendents have told them that they're going to be measured in terms of whether they can raise the numbers each year—no matter where they work.

James Comer

Causes them to want to do something?

Ronald Edmonds

That's right.

James Comer

But that gets back to whether they are in a position to do something. Do they know how to do something? If they do not know how, it only makes them more anxious.

Ronald Edmonds

That's the reason for saying to the superintendents "For heaven's sake, you can't afford to do that if you're not prepared to turn right around and say, 'We know how to raise the number.' " I have said to superintendents: "One of the implications of what you are doing is that you are recasting the purposes of the central administration. It now becomes the purpose of the entire administration to be of assistance to local schools."

One of the implications of what you are doing is that you are recasting the purposes of the central administration. It now becomes the purpose of the entire administration to be of assistance to local schools.

James Comer

Agreed. We have done just what you're talking about. And the school board has demanded certain kinds of changes in certain periods of time. They have set expectations. In spite of that, sometimes schools respond positively and sometimes they resist. Maybe we need to take a look at that approach in terms of the resistance that we find. We can cut through the resistance, but not by showing people that there is underachievement. We cut through it by providing them with the help that you're calling a second step or part of the one-two punch. We start with the first step, and we get people to volunteer and give their support and have them become successful so that they want to maintain that success. And that's what drives the enterprise.

We start with the first step, and we get people to volunteer and give their support and have them become successful so that they want to maintain that success. And that's what drives the enterprise.

Issue Six

The Emerging Dialectic

- Parental involvement in effective schools
- School effects and family effects
- The future will tell

Throughout, Comer and Edmonds express differing opinions about the significance of parental involvement in the school improvement process. As the conversation concludes, Edmonds concedes that parents should be included in the school improvement process. Comer acknowledges that it would be possible to improve schools without substantial parental involvement, but calls it "illegitimate" to do so.

Edmonds presents a final challenge—a design to "advance this discourse." He envisions a coming together of the people who do research on school effectiveness, research on teacher effectiveness, and research on the process of change with the practitioners who are using the knowledge to change schools.

His design has become the foundation for the National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development. Through the Center and the thousands of educators across the country who have listened and learned from Edmonds and Comer, the discourse can continue to advance.

Edmonds and Comer brought us from an era of despair to an era of hope. What we owe them is an era of renewal.

Ronald Edmonds

One of the things we try to make clear is that it is highly inappropriate to do a design for school improvement which says you're going to ask principals to change their behavior, and then ask the teachers to change, and then the custodians, and so forth. Instead, the design presumes that, depending on how you diagnose the environment, it may be necessary to ask 60 percent of the adults in the school to change their behavior all at once. And you undertake to get all of them to change their behavior all at once.

Now, I remarked on parents because I'm fairly passive about the parent role. But when you publicly portray school effectiveness in the ways that I was trying to illustrate, parents can decide for themselves whether or not they care that some schools in their district are much more effective than other schools with the same kinds of kids. I would hope that they would use that information to organize themselves and to exercise some initiatives and to insist that the least effective school becomes as effective as the most effective school. I don't know whether the parents will do that, but I know how to keep schools from portraying achievement in ways that obscure the school's response to the kids I'm most interested in.

I know how to keep schools from portraying achievement in ways that obscure the school's response to the kids I'm most interested in.

James Comer

Also, not only you, but everybody, emphasized the business of strong principals. Our experience has been that it didn't require a strong principal to have effective schools—that the principal grew in the process but did not

start out as a strong principal. The second point I want to respond to is the assumption that people will use information in a rational, logical fashion. I think that we can assume that, in many places, and under certain kinds of conditions, people are not rational problem-solvers. In some cases there are bureaucratic arrangements that prevent them from becoming good problem-solvers, even if they are rational. I guess I am not opposed to having information. I think information is valuable. But in situations where people are likely to react to information in an irrational fashion, I would rather just ignore the information and involve them in the process that allows them to accomplish something, and then get involved in the information.

Ronald Edmonds

Well, I guess I really do presume rationality. In any case, Jim, in my designs for school improvement, I don't depend on parents doing anything. If parents do something for me in the context of what I do, it's a fringe benefit.

James Comer

Don't you depend on their participating on the committee?

. . . I don't, for example, depend on parents organizing politically . If they did do that, I think it would be a fringe benefit.

Ronald Edmonds

That's formal. Parents participate because the committee isn't constituted unless parents are represented but I don't, for example, depend on parents organizing politically . If they did do that, I think it would be a fringe benefit. I don't depend on their spontaneously doing that.

John Ervin

Ron, since your intervention focuses on school effects, parent participation is not integral to the process. Your focus is on what the people do who are the primary actors in the school.

Ronald Edmonds

Inside the school.

John Ervin

Seems to me that school effectiveness cannot be developed in the true sense of the word without the participation of a broader range of actors.

James Comer

I would say that in settings where you have reasonably competent teachers, who can respond to information in a rational way, and there are no bureaucratic interferences, you can develop effective schools without parent participation. In some of the most troubled schools, we do not have reasonably effective principals, we do not have collections of reasonably effective teachers, and we have powerless parents who are excluded from the system. We do not have bureaucratic arrangements that allow the superintendent to put pressure on the system. Here we get even more than reaction and resistance, because the system is so weak in the first place. When you stress it, you get reaction to stress. When you're dealing with that kind of situation, before you provide schools with information, you provide them with success and strength to deal with that information constructively.

Ronald Edmonds

You know Jim, I think my answer to that is that you try to empower the school by generating within the school itself illustrations of success. I try to show the school that another school serving highly similar populations has already done what the first school might like to do. I do not depend on illustrating the possibilities in the school itself. I say to them: "Look at the fact that your superintendent portrayed achievement across ten schools in this district and found out that you've got one school in this town that comes close to what you already want. Go visit them."

. . . "Look at the fact that your superintendent portrayed achievement across ten schools in this district and found out that you've got one school in this town that comes close to what you already want.

John Ervin

I thought I heard Jim saying that the school can be an effective school with a weak principal, if other things, including parent/citizen participation, are present.

Ronald Edmonds

And I say to Jim that I am unwilling to say that, because from a tactical point of view I cannot imagine how I can hold school people responsible for going after something that is not a part of their professional work.

James Comer

It may well be true that you can complement or supplement a weak principal by getting heightened levels of parent participation. I acknowledge that; and I believe it and subscribe to it. I believe that getting leadership from some teachers in the building can be even more important.

I just am unwilling to put forth a design for school improvement that depends on parents, because the scenario I envision is one in which the school people say "We tried to get parent cooperation but we didn't get it, therefore. . . ."

You can do without parents. It will be easier for you. But it will be better for the parents and better for the children in the long run with parents.

Ronald Edmonds

See, Jim, I don't dispute what you are saying. I just am unwilling to put forth a design for school improvement that depends on parents, because the scenario I envision is one in which the school people say "We tried to get parent cooperation but we didn't get it, therefore. . . ." I stick with what is inside the school because there is no way to avoid that.

James Comer

I argue that you don't have to accept that when they say that. I back up to your position. You can do without parents. It will be easier for you. But it will be better for the parents and better for the children in the long run—with parents.

Ronald Edmonds

I always say that. That's part of the reason parents are always included in the school committee. That's why every one of the 21 designs from the Michigan school districts included parent participation. However, none of the designs depends on it, but everyone includes it. That's the distinction I'm trying to draw.

James Comer

Our design really does not depend on the parents. It depends on the governance and management committee.

Ronald Edmonds

Could it exist without parents?

James Comer

I would characterize it as illegitimate, but it could.

Ronald Edmonds

When we do the needs assessment, we always include interviews with parents.

James Comer

I'm less worried about determining income groups than I am about some of the needs assessment kinds of things—where the principals get defensive and teachers get defensive. Needs assessment instruments ask first, "Do you have high expectations?" and second, "Do you think that all the teachers in the school have high expectations?" All the teachers felt they had high expectations; yet most teachers felt that there were other teachers who didn't. When you present that kind of information, all you do is to present something that potentially can create suspicion and conflict within the system.

All the teachers felt they had high expectations; yet most teachers felt that there were other teachers who didn't.

Ronald Edmonds

Is that a surprise? Don't people already know that? Is that new information?

James Comer

If it is not new and everybody knows it, why do you need it? You have everybody saying, "I have high expectations. . . ."

Ronald Edmonds

And somebody in this room doesn't. My sense of schools is that's already talked about informally all over the school.

James Comer

Yes, but what happens to the teacher who now discovers that somebody thinks that he or she is not performing adequately? And is not certain who feels that way, or why? In a system where you have not established "no fault," and where you're just starting, you run the risk of creating bits of information that could breed suspicion, doubt, and mistrust. I would argue that it is much better not to start by documenting anything, because most everybody knows what is wrong, basically, with the schools. You should start with planning together as a group. My feeling, and here's where we probably differ, is that it is the interaction that makes the difference, not the information. It is the emotion, the psychological commitment that grows out of collaborative planning, not the intellect that brings constructive change.

My feeling, and here's where we probably differ, is that it is the interaction that makes the difference, not the information.

Ronald Edmonds

Yes, that is a big difference, because my approach to school improvement is one that says we are going to fix our attention on what we have defined as the critical portions of the environment.

James Comer

I don't think that that is information. It's a tool.

Ronald Edmonds

You may be right about that. I think I really do use the information as the impetus for whatever dynamic emerges. What is said in that school committee is "Ladies and gentlemen, the data on school effectiveness research showed that schools meeting those standards of effectiveness to which all of you could happily subscribe have the following characteristics. . . ."

John Ervin

Do you find that an alarming message to address the faculty, Jim?

James Comer

Well, it is unnecessary. It's like spanking. It doesn't hurt when parents are caring, skilled, and responsible, and where the parent-child relationship is sound. But when that's the case, you don't need it. Other approaches are just as effective. Spanking in troubled and poorly functioning families can create as many difficult behaviors as it stops, if it stops any.

John Ervin

How would you start off? If you came in next, to the same meeting, or the meeting down the hall?

James Comer

I would say, "Look, we all know that the school is not doing as well as we would like it to do. And we think that the children in this school can achieve as well as children in any school. And we think that you can do that by planning and organizing and doing certain kinds of things together."

Then they start to plan. They plan something that has a high chance for success . . . usually related to social climate. As they have success here, they also take a look at academic performance.

Having success in the social area, they are more likely to believe that academic improvement is possible, that they can make it happen. They plan and set academic goals. They develop strategies for achieving their goals. They determine that they want to be here by a certain time and set timetables. Because defensiveness and resistance weren't created, there is now an environment of committed people trying to succeed in a good climate. We make the climate, and consider the creation of the climate an important goal.

Because defensiveness and resistance weren't created, there is now an environment of committed people trying to succeed in a good climate.

John Ervin

You sense that Ron's strategy would jar that climate, or would interject a distrust or a blame; and yours would not.

James Comer

It has that potential, particularly as it is introduced to people out in the field who are in the most trouble already. But I don't think there are any designs that are too foolproof.

John Ervin

I would agree with that. If we are going to discuss this kind of information then we have to trust each other. I identify the absence of trust and the absence of respect or tolerance as a key problem in changing schools. One of the ways you deal with that is to bring people together, enable them to have successful experiences, and to get to know each other. You break down some barriers and deal with that distrust and simultaneously address your academic program.

I identify the absence of trust and the absence of respect or tolerance as a key problem in changing schools.

Ronald Edmonds

The reason I was smiling was that I was thinking of two principles that are a written part of our curriculum in this training program. One, we instruct the liaison people and the superintendent and the principals not to diagnose problems for which they don't have solutions. Two, they are never to criticize professional behavior without accompanying the criticism with the recitation of obtainable behavior that, if adopted, will solve the problem. There are no problems associated with the correlates of school effectiveness that are not liable to solution within the school. When you start diagnosing

There are no problems associated with the correlates of school effectiveness that are not liable to solution within the school.

problems that derive from environs outside the school, you are diagnosing problems for which you do not have solutions.

James Comer

What about this problem? Our kids in this school need more recreational opportunities. Can you provide the answer to that one?

Ronald Edmonds

There are schools that have diagnosed precisely that problem and set aside a room in which they organized aerobic dancing.

James Comer

But that means you are doing social things, and you are addressing climate issues. It is your statement that you are not that leads some people to ignore them altogether.

Ronald Edmonds

I say to the school people: We are teaching you so that you can take your school to our measure of instructional effectiveness. The limit on what we are teaching you is that we cannot take you there. Furthermore, we doubt that you can have educational excellence without very substantial family support and parent participation. And that's how we discriminate between what the limitations of the school are and its interaction with the family. We are prepared to say that the school effect is more powerful than the family effect, and that the school effects influences the teaching of basic skills. That's probably the limit of what the school effect can do. But if you want to go beyond academic functioning to academic flourishing, you probably can't do anything more.

. . . the most debilitating characteristic of the public school discourse in the U.S. today is the extent to which the family factor still is conventional wisdom; still the most pervasive explanation for the distribution of achievement.

James Comer

Why not take school and family effects and combine them for a more powerful effect?

Ronald Edmonds

Because the most debilitating characteristic of the public school discourse in the U.S. today is the extent to which the family factor still is con-

ventional wisdom; still the most pervasive explanation for the distribution of achievement.

James Comer

I agree that it is a problem. I just think that there is a way to deal with it, within a system and within a building, so that you change it. The intention of those who did the research was to give teachers and school people a body of information and understanding that they could use to teach low-income kids more effectively. The research was wrong in ignoring that everything is an interaction. The researchers did not look at the other side of the coin; that is, what goes on in schools that is troublesome.

You understand what goes on in families that is troublesome. You understand what goes on in schools that is troublesome. We take the position that we can't change what goes on in families, but we can bring those parents who can cope reasonably well into the system together with principals, teachers, and others who can cope reasonably well, and help them create effective schools. And I like those terms, school effectiveness and home effectiveness. Combine them, and let everybody grow and flourish. You can do that in a reasonably short period of time, and it does not require sophisticated skills. What I hear is: You are in fact doing that. Many of our parents who worked on planning groups and participated in school activities went back to school themselves, took jobs for the first time, supported their children better, even began to vote in political elections.

. . . we can't change what goes on in families, but we can bring those parents who can cope reasonably well into the system together with principals, teachers, and others who can cope reasonably well, and help them create effective schools.

Ronald Edmonds

Any time you talk to me about anything beyond the acquisition of basic school skills I would simply fall back to where you know I already am— that the failure to convey basic school skills precludes everything else we're talking about. I am willing to try to become more sophisticated by figuring out how it is that you do more. But at the moment, I don't feel very defensive about saying that the major focus on school improvement in New York was in raising achievement in very traditional forms, under very traditional circumstances, measured in a very traditional way.

. . . the failure to convey basic school skills precludes everything else we're talking about.

John Ervin

Are there some other people out there that we really ought to be talking with to expand this conversation?

Ronald Edmonds

I think you ought to think about structuring an encounter in which you either commission papers or produce a product that consists of at least the following kinds of people:

- Some of the people who contribute to the literature on school effectiveness;
- Some of the people who contribute to the literature on teacher effectiveness;
- Some of the people who are most notable because of their knowledge of processes of change;
- Practitioners who are using all three of those bodies of information to run schools.

Next year, and the year after, our continuing knowledge of how participating schools are doing, their differences and similarities, and their abilities and outcomes are really going to advance this discourse.

Now, clearly, that couldn't be comprehensive, but somebody should be commissioned to portray, simultaneously, the substance or content of each of those four areas and the extent to which they interact. There really is a movement. That's fairly clear. I think that the most useful body of information accumulates even as we speak. Next year, and the year after, our continuing knowledge of how participating schools are doing, their differences and similarities, and their abilities and outcomes, are really going to advance this discourse.

Epilogue

All of us who grapple with the difficult issue of school improvement, in general, and urban school improvement, in particular, should extend a special note of appreciation to the Danforth Foundation and John Ervin, its former vice president, for initiating this important conversation between James Comer and Ronald Edmonds in 1982. When Dr. Ervin arranged to bring these two scholars together to talk to each other, and indirectly to all of us, he probably had no idea what the future held for the two participants or for school reform.

No one could have known that in a few short months after his conversation with Comer, Edmonds would pass away at the age of 48. His contribution to urban school reform had barely begun to be generally realized, but those of us who had the opportunity to work with him knew that his agenda and his eloquent discourse should not, and could not, end with his death.

The torch passed to many colleagues throughout the country, who continued to advance the cause of improved education for poor and minority students.

Dr. Comer's commitment to school improvement, beginning with his work in two New Haven schools in 1968, has been chronicled in his article in the November, 1988 *Scientific American*, which discusses the successes that his model for school renewal has achieved in various settings throughout the United States. Those of us who have attempted to carry on the school improvement agenda based on Effective Schools Research continue to be inspired by, and learn from, James Comer's work.

All of us who care deeply about the state of public education in the United States today must be impressed with both the **timeliness** and the **timelessness** of the issues discussed by Comer and Edmonds, in the course of their 1982 conversation.

The timeliness of their discussion is notable because it took place before the publication of the now famous, *A Nation at Risk*. Even before there was a more generalized and pervasive call for school renewal, Comer

and Edmonds were already providing leadership on how such renewal could be accomplished successfully.

In his book, *Making the Future Work,* John Diebold, author and futurist, said that enduring change tends to occur when necessity coincides with vision. If we equate the notion of enduring change with authentic school improvement for poor and minority students, it becomes clear that Edmonds and Comer had developed and begun to "field-test" a vision for successful improvement even before most of us had begun to articulate the necessity for school change.

A review of the perspectives of both Comer and Edmonds reveals that each tended to emphasize different aspects of the school improvement process. Nonetheless, the similarities in their approaches far outweigh the differences. Those of who are part of the school improvement network should be reassured and renewed by the overarching message of our two mentors. They were single-minded in their belief that all children can learn and that schools can be as effective for poor and minority students as they have been for middle class and nonminority students.

In their conversation, Comer and Edmonds vividly illustrate how their vision can come to describe reality in many more places, if only those who have a stake in the outcomes exhibit the necessary political will to make change happen.

It has taken nearly eight years, but now many states, several of the regional accreditation agencies, and most recently, the federal government have instituted changes the either require local schools and districts to become more effective, or at least give them the opportunity to be effective for more students. Again, the models created by both Comer and Edmonds have shown that school improvement is possible. They provided much needed energy to overcome the skepticism of many who either did not want school improvement, or did not believe in it—if school improvement meant teaching all children. One must shudder to think what might have happened to poor and minority students, if the often misguided excellence movement had not been tempered by the concern for equity, as presented by leaders like Edmonds and Comer.

Their discussion in 1982 centered on several problems, issues, and concerns that have challenged, and will continue to challenge, educators for many years. In that sense, the work of Edmonds and Comer and the issues they addressed are timeless, for they are at the heart of the school improvement movement.

The National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development has chosen to publish this discussion, because the issues and the thoughts of these two leaders are as fresh and relevant today as they were when the two were first brought together in 1982.

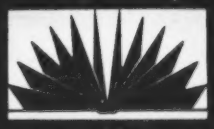
Giving a people hope is the first obligation of a leader. The efforts and writings of Edmonds and Comer give all of us hope. Truly, we are indebted to these scholars for their contribution. We know that all children can learn; we know how to create the school and community conditions that will assure this outcome in all of our schools today. It is up to us to dare to gather and organize the political will to make it happen.

Lawrence W. Lezotte, Ph.D.
Director
National Center for Effective Schools
Research and Development

January, 1989

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
James Comer & Ronald Edmonds

Fundamentals of Effective School Improvement



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